

# THE EQUANIMOUS MIND

*How a ten-day meditation boot camp awakened my awareness  
to the fundamental principles of life and existence*

Manish Chopra, PhD

# The Equanimous Mind

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First Edition

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**e·quan·i·mous** /'ɪkwænəməs/ [ih-kwan-uh-muhs] *adjective*  
having or showing **equanimity**; even-tempered.

**e·qua·nim·i·ty** /'ɪkwə'nɪmɪti/ [ee-kwuh-nim-i-tee] *noun*  
mental or emotional stability or composure, especially under tension or strain; calmness; equilibrium.

**mind** /maɪnd/ [mahynd] *noun*

1. (in a human or other conscious being) the element, part, substance, or process that reasons, thinks, feels, wills, perceives, judges, etc.
2. Psychology – the totality of conscious and unconscious mental processes and activities.
3. intellect or understanding, as distinguished from the faculties of feeling and willing; intelligence.
4. a particular instance of the intellect or intelligence, as in a person.
5. a person considered with reference to intellectual power.
6. intellectual power or ability.
7. reason, sanity, or sound mental condition.
8. a way of thinking and feeling; disposition; temper.
9. a state of awareness or remembrance.
10. opinion, view, or sentiments.
11. inclination or desire.
12. purpose, intention, or will.
13. psychic or spiritual being, as opposed to matter.
14. a conscious or intelligent agency or being.
15. remembrance or recollection; memory; attention; thoughts.



## Dedication

*This book is dedicated to Pujya Guruji<sup>1</sup>, Satya Narayan Goenka, Sahayak Acharya<sup>2</sup>, Jayantilal Shah, and all the dharma sevaks<sup>3</sup> of the ten-day Vipassana Program (Dec 22, 2010 to Jan 2, 2011) at the Dhamma Pattana Centre in Gorai, Mumbai.*

*AND*

*To my wife, Vineeta, for convincing and encouraging me to attend a Vipassana camp despite my initial reservations.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Teacher

<sup>2</sup> Conducting (assistant) teacher

<sup>3</sup> Dhamma servers (Nirmal Punjabi, Puneet Singhal, Narendra Kadages, Bhaskaran, Satya)



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## Disclaimer

*This book is not about the instructional details of the Vipassana technique, though references are made to explain my experience with it. Some nuances about the origins of Vipassana might be slightly inaccurate given that this book is based on my recollection of the stories from the evening discourses and not based on literature research. Vipassana is a complex meditative technique that should be learned only under formal instruction from trained instructors. Please do not try it on your own as it might lead to unintended consequences.*

*Metaphorically, I am sharing my experiences of undergoing a highly invasive multiple-organ 'life surgery', not as the surgeon but as the patient undergoing this life-altering procedure. Just as we hear about medical miracles but sometimes find it hard to relate to them, we need to come into the 'hospital' (meditation camp) to experience the transformative process for ourselves.*

*This book is not a self-help guide, simply a chronicle of the day by day changes I experienced during my first Vipassana camp and the pursuant existential impact the technique has had over my life and wellbeing.*

*Each individual's experience with the technique is unique. No two students of Vipassana have the exact same set of experiences and the teachings of the technique discourage drawing direct comparisons. This is in keeping with the tenet that the only truth that our mind absolutely trusts is what we individually observe, not what we read about or hear from others. As such, simply treat this account as one person's initial experience with Vipassana, which by definition is different from what anyone else might experience.*



## **What is *Vipassana*?**

*Vipassana*, which means to see things objectively as they really are, is one of India's most ancient techniques of meditation. It was rediscovered by Gautama Buddha more than 2,500 years ago and was taught by him as a universal remedy for universal ills.

This non-sectarian technique aims for the total eradication of mental impurities and the resultant highest happiness of full liberation. Its purpose is healing – not merely the curing of diseases, but the essential healing of human suffering.

*Vipassana* is a way of self-transformation through self-observation. It focuses on the deep interconnection between mind and body, which can be experienced directly by disciplined attention to the physical sensations that form the life of the body, and that continuously interconnect and condition the life of the mind. It is this observation-based, self-exploratory journey to the common root of mind and body that dissolves mental impurity, resulting in a balanced mind full of love and compassion.

The scientific laws that operate one's thoughts, feelings, judgements and sensations become clear. Through direct experience, the nature of how one grows or regresses, how one produces suffering or frees oneself from suffering is understood. Life becomes characterised by increased awareness, non-delusion, self-control and peace.

Since the time of Buddha to the present day, *Vipassana* has been handed down by an unbroken chain of teachers.

Although of Indian descent, the current teacher in this chain, *Pujya Guruji* Satya Narayan Goenka, was born and raised in Burma (Myanmar).

While living there he had the good fortune to learn *Vipassana* from his teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, who was at the time a high ranking government official. After receiving training from his teacher for 14 years, Mr. Goenka settled in India and began teaching *Vipassana* in 1969.

Since then he has taught tens of thousands of people of all races and religions in both the East and West. In 1982 he began to appoint assistant teachers (*sahayak acharyas*) to help him meet the growing demand for *Vipassana* courses, which are currently taught in nearly 200 locations around the world.

Complete details about *Vipassana* meditation, camp locations and course schedules are available at [www.dhamma.org](http://www.dhamma.org)

## Prologue

I couldn't have been happier and more fulfilled considering various aspects of my life – great career as a partner in an esteemed consulting firm, excellent family support, wonderful loving wife, ample worldly possessions, and an amazing circle of friends around the world. And with a recent move to Asia from the US, further professional career growth opportunities and a sense of personal renewal was being fulfilled. However, in recent years I had felt that something was off about my existence in a way that I couldn't quite understand clearly or explain to myself. I am not sure whether to call it existential contemplation or a clichéd 'mid-life crisis' of sorts, but I began to feel more strongly that deep down something was not clicking. Despite this line of inquiry brewing subliminally in the recesses of my consciousness, I wasn't actively seeking to uncover the deeper and hidden meaning of life by wandering idly or climbing mountains and forsaking what I had worked so hard over the years to create for myself.

Creating more impetus for a changed mental paradigm within the current life construct was the fact that I felt lately that I was a bit too much on the edge, and was encouraged by my wife to attend a meditation camp similar to one she had attended several years back in the US. I was an unusual customer for such a seemingly 'touchy feely' new-age approach as my background in science and engineering would have normally made me dismiss such pursuits out of hand. But thinking that this might be beneficial for relieving

stress, which was a big enough goal in itself, given my high-intensity career, I thought it might be worthwhile to attend. I was further tempted to go because this particular camp seemed to be offered especially for business executives, so I figured there would be particular emphasis on how to deal with stress in the corporate world.

I'd had to cancel once earlier in the year because of some unexpected work and thus was determined to attend the camp this time round. A leadership coach I had been working with also seemed convinced (and I agreed) that now was an even better time to attend such a program to step back and reflect as I'd had more recent challenges to work through, including how to operate and establish myself in a completely new and different geographic region.

The year-end timing was also a helpful enabler – much as some of us like to feel that things wouldn't work without us being in the office, the last two weeks of the year are the typically the easiest to truly tune out because almost everyone else (including my clients) takes time off at the same time. To facilitate matters further, my wife only had a week of vacation around Christmas, so I had to find a productive use of my additional holiday time anyway, and the timing of the *Vipassana* camp worked perfectly.

To start off my two weeks of probably the first ever solitary vacation since getting married, I first went and saw my parents in Chandigarh (in the northern part of India) and then came back via Delhi to attend the wedding of a close friend and colleague. This was a great culmination of events before heading to the meditation camp as the indulgence in the festivities there puts a finer point on the sort of life I

had been living – fancy meals, expensive alcohol, rich foods, eclectic company of friends and socialites – truly celebratory delights of the senses!

As can be estimated, this sort of lifestyle definitely had its impact. Despite a fairly active workout regimen, I was technically 15 kg overweight by BMI (body mass index) guidelines, had borderline high total cholesterol levels and deteriorating (though within safe limits) liver functions. All this compounded with facets of a hectic work schedule, partial insomnia (or sleep deprivation, given the day of the week) and an overachieving mindset to overcome all these obstacles through sheer will power. I was still fortunate enough (relative to some others I know or work with) to at least have a very full life outside of work – playing squash two or three times a week, extensive leisure travel and learning a new language (Mandarin) to boot.

Despite doing well by any career or material standards, I started feeling that my overall wellbeing was in a state of unstable equilibrium and not sustainable as my life and work responsibilities continued to increase. Having been through multiple rounds of yo-yo dieting and over a year of leadership effectiveness coaching, I was ready to try a truly different, out-of-the-box ‘mind-over-matter’ type approach to re-tune my life’s operating system.

If I was counselling one of my clients with such an overall ‘trajectory’, I would have said that this was a case of great life ‘performance’ but poor ‘health’, or say a fine income statement with a bankrupt and highly leveraged balance sheet! To such a client, I would have recommended a ‘turnaround’ initiative to bring performance and health

into balanced harmony. Perhaps it was time to have a taste of my own medicine.

*Vipassana* had helped my wife sort through some of her own existential issues at the time she attended her first camp. Going into the camp, I hoped I would learn to better manage work-related stress and bring more balance into my life. Though not the primary motivation, potential weight loss was admittedly a selling point, as I'd seen my wife, who is a real lightweight to begin with, drop a size upon getting back from this program. Surely, I would do better given my starting point!

Thankfully, my wife had prepared me a bit for what to expect going into the program:

- Dormitory style accommodation and facilities
- Complete silence for full ten days
- No alcohol or meat eating during the program
- Wake up calls at 4 am
- Two meals and light evening snack at 5 pm. No dinner!

There was still a lot more that she had omitted to mention, which worked out well because I might not have braved the registration process had I known more about the program.

Ten days is a fairly long time for anyone to commit away from family, work and the conveniences of modern living. Yet given my quest for an improved sense of wellbeing, I persisted and forged ahead. Little did I know at the time that these would be the ten most significant days of my life.

Having read accounts of people who had gone through life-altering events or turning point moments, I had always



felt inspired but often wondered if I would ever have a personal life experience which would energise me to want to share it with the entire world.

I can see now that it takes a bit of time in life's 'pressure cooker' and a certain amount of luck to come upon such events. Not only did I achieve the now relatively modest-seeming goal of stress relief, the process awakened me to the most fundamental principles of life and existence and has unleashed my mind in ways completely unimaginable.

The chapters that follow describe the day by day, hour by hour, sometimes minute by minute experience I had at the ten-day *Vipassana* meditation camp from December 22, 2010 to January 2, 2011 at the *Dhamma* Pattana Centre near the Global Pagoda in Gorai, Mumbai. I initially started writing to document for myself the positive changes I experienced during the camp so I could remind and motivate myself to continue meditating to sustain the benefits over the long term.

I have been through enough attempted 'personal change' efforts in my adult life and was quite familiar with how the euphoria of the initial results fizzles out in a matter of months if not weeks or days! So I didn't want to look back and think that this was just another passing phase or fad. Sort of a way of 'pinching myself' to ensure I wasn't dreaming or hallucinating for ten days when I came back to the real world.

Subsequently, the typical self doubt that I have experienced kicking-in in similar situations, that this change wouldn't really last long term, evaporated completely. That's when this personal journal turned into a drive to share

this experience with anyone and everyone I can reach to encourage others to draw similar or greater benefits from this secular meditative technique.

Having experienced a small yet lasting taste of the truly universal laws that govern life, happiness and misery, existence and meaning, I feel inspired with an effortless drive and energy to write and share my account with the rest of humanity with the hope that at least a small fraction of readers might benefit from a similar personal transformation.

Even though improved health is considered only a small (but important) side benefit compared to developing greater existential understanding, dropping two notches on my belt and seeing my jaw line for the first time in five years, I am convinced this process holds holistic merit.

Even if only one other person gains this knowledge of *Dhamma* (the principles of absolute truth) by learning *Vipassana* meditation and an equanimous approach to living, I will feel fulfilled in this endeavour.

I wish that many more people exit the cycle of misery and find the state of equanimity that an experiential understanding of *Dhamma* can bring about through the proper use of the *Vipassana* meditation technique.

Manish Chopra  
Singapore

## ***Vipassana Course Curriculum\****

<b>Day</b>	<b>Program</b>
0 (Dusk)	Pre-program introductory talk Noble silence begins
1	Basic breathing observation instruction ( <i>Aana Pana</i> meditation begins)
2	Practice <i>Aana Pana</i> and experience basic sensations in and around the nostrils
3	Continued practice of <i>Aana Pana</i> and experiencing sensations in a triangular area around the nose
4	Focus observation of sensations on a small area between the nostrils and above the upper lip Instruction on <i>Vipassana</i> technique
5	Observe bodily sensations while maintaining equanimity, one body part at a time, from head to toes
6	Practice head to toes observation of bodily sensations and in reverse direction from toes to head
7	Observe symmetric body parts (e.g., arms) simultaneously during head to toes and reverse bodily scans
8	Observe the entire body in one full sweep ‘free flow’ (back and forth)
9	Practice full sweeps plus start ‘penetrating’ body parts, one at a time, then entire body
10	<i>Metta Bhavana</i> (compassionate loving) meditation and course follow-up instructions Noble silence broken
11 (Dawn)	Final discourse and practice <i>Metta Bhavana</i> Principles of <i>Seva</i> (voluntary service)

*\*Based on recollection*

## Daily Program

Time	Activity
0400	Wake up and shower
0430	
0500	Meditation in <i>Dhamma</i> Hall or sleeping room
0530	
0600	
0630	
0700	Breakfast and rest
0730	
0800	Group meditation in <i>Dhamma</i> Hall (mandatory)
0830	
0900	Instructions and check-up on progress
0930	
1000	Meditation in <i>Dhamma</i> Hall or sleeping room
1030	
1100	
1130	Lunch and rest
1200	
1230	Optional Q&A with conducting teacher
1300	
1330	Meditation in <i>Dhamma</i> Hall or sleeping room
1400	

<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>
1430	Group meditation in <i>Dhamma</i> Hall (mandatory)
1500	
1530	Instructions and check-up on progress
1600	
1630	
1700	Tea, snacks, and rest
1730	
1800	Group meditation in <i>Dhamma</i> Hall (mandatory)
1830	
1900	Instructions and short break
1930	Evening discourse by <i>Pujya Guruji</i> S.N. Goenka
2000	
2030	Final instructions and wrap-up meditation
2100	Optional Q&A with conducting teacher
2130	Retire to room and lights out
2200	Sleep
2300	
0000	
0100	
0200	
0300	
0400	



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*Day 0*

## Unexpected Beginnings



My day started at 5 am as I had to make a two-plus hour drive to New Delhi airport from the Neemrana Hotel Resort in Rajasthan where I had attended a friend's wedding the previous night. Despite heavy traffic even at that early hour due to overnight truck congestion, I managed to reach the airport at 7:30 am for my 10:30 am flight. Thinking this would give me some time to have breakfast before my flight to Mumbai where I was to join the *Vipassana* camp at 2 pm, I proceeded to get my flight check-in out of the way and find a nice restaurant in the swanky new T3 terminal in Delhi.

While in the check-in line, I heard a final boarding call for all passengers for the 8:30 am flight to Mumbai by the same airline. It struck me that now that I had arrived three hours early, I might as well try to get a stand-by seat on an

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earlier flight and head to my destination sooner, especially because domestic flights can easily be significantly delayed in India.

I cut ahead in the long queue and started walking towards the check-in counter on the off chance that I could stand-by. Another passenger patiently waiting his turn in the line looked displeased to see me walk ahead to the ticketing counter. I tried to avert his glaze and went straight to the most congenial and cheerful looking airline agent. She said that the flight was overbooked, so I reconciled to the nice breakfast scenario with my original flight, figuring it was what I really preferred anyway.

Suddenly, one of the other check-in agents screamed, “I am closing the 8:30 am Mumbai flight and there is only one seat left”, to her fellow agents. It was now already 7:45 am and they were approaching their 45-minute check-in cut-off time for the flight. My check-in agent’s face lit up and so did mine. I pleadingly smiled at her to grab that seat for me if it wasn’t already taken by another impatient passenger. I simultaneously started whipping out platinum elite status cards from various partner airlines as a qualification for being the most deserving passenger for the precious last seat. She smiled and winked her eyes as if to say, “I got it. Stop selling past the close!”

I heaved a sigh of relief and convinced myself that early arrival into Mumbai was probably worth missing breakfast for. One final keystroke of the computer from the agent and I was in the precious middle seat in the back of the plane to Mumbai.

Now the mad dash began. Having managed to get a

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seat on the flight, I noticed that the boarding gate was quite distant in the grand new spread-out Terminal 3. It was now 8 am and security clearance lines in India can be long and slow. Despite ten years of travelling through airports overseas with little or no time margin, I still had to sprint and barely made the flight.

The flight was relatively short and soon I was in a prepaid taxi heading to Gorai to the *Vipassana* camp site. Not only had I skipped a proper breakfast, 11 am was an odd time for lunch when I arrived into Mumbai. It was a long taxi ride and the route went from main highways to side streets and eventually through rural back roads. I had promised to call my in-laws who were to pick me up after the program was over, to give them driving directions before starting the camp, as I wouldn't be able to call during the camp due to the requirement of maintaining perfect silence throughout the course of the next ten days.

As luck would have it, my phone that was functioning perfectly in Delhi only a couple of hours ago wasn't getting signal and nothing I could do would get it to work. Being the new iPhone 4, it wasn't easy to simply pull out the SIM card and do a hard reboot of the system. I kicked myself for not carrying the special key that would allow me to pull out the SIM card from the iPhone.

Oddly, my Blackberry was still working so I kept typing out short notes to my father-in-law every time we encountered a tricky turn that would warrant a mention, as the seemingly obvious route would lead down the wrong track. After two or three navigational notes, I figured he could more or less follow the way and could ask around

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for directions in case of difficulty. I arrived at the camp at 1 pm.

I remembered reading in the course registration confirmation email that we could arrive 2 pm onwards and no later than 5 pm. When I stepped in with my stroll-on and laptop bags, the registration desk was a beehive of rapid activity. People were going in and out of the adjacent dining hall. I got in line and was given an induction form with a code of discipline written in Hindi, as they had run out of the English ones.

I now realised that they had asked us to arrive by 2 pm, not 2 pm onwards, and that 5 pm was really the time after which they would not accept any entrants. I was glad that I had managed to stand-by on the earlier flight as I would definitely have been a late arrival given that my original flight landed at 2 pm and it was nearly another two hour drive to the camp site in the outskirts of town. I was doubly glad when I found out later that some of the late-comers had to share rooms.

I was a bit bummed that I had to read the code of discipline in Hindi, a language that I had completely lost touch with reading, even though I had aced it in my 10<sup>th</sup> grade board exams. Also, I wondered why in the world they wanted me to sign this sort of thing again after going through the exacting online registration in which I had already committed to a no alcohol policy, a no speaking policy, no this and that, once already.

My initial impression was that this 'welcome and registration' process was a bit overdone. I waited my turn with the completed registration form in hand and with my

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signature on the code of discipline, for which I had to jog my Hindi reading and vocabulary. I was slightly unsure of what I was committing to, as this list of conditions was considerably longer than the one I had signed up for on the course registration website! Having come such a long way for the course, what were a few more conditions to comply with?

The course registrar motioned me to sit down and started to review my paperwork. He noted that I had put my wife's name down in the 'How did you hear about *Vipassana*' section and remarked with interest, "Ah, your wife has encouraged you to attend! It's nice that you already have a meditator in the family." I didn't have the heart to tell him that my wife had meditated for a few days after returning from her *Vipassana* camp in 2006 but hadn't continued with the technique.

Then came the next question, "I see that you are a management consultant, is that a stressful job?" It was funny yet charming that this guy had no idea that being a partner in a management consulting firm was probably as stressful as business careers can get! I coolly told him that, yes, one could say there is stress in my line of work, which is why I had come to the camp.

"So, does your job require you to do a lot of mental concentration work?", he then enquired. Still amused with this person, I told him that concentration and focus were the name of the game when it came to consulting. He responded, "Very well, because your ability to concentrate will improve, and you'll even learn some of it today." I nodded in hopeful anticipation and wondered why he hadn't said much about

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stress relief.

He then went on to repeat some of the program formalities, which I knew already, but it was getting to sound like a more and more formidable process. He stated, “There is no cost to students for attending the course itself and the only thing we charge for is the laundry, if you choose to use the service.” I knew already that the course ran on donations from previous students who had benefitted from it and wanted to give back by providing for future students.

I began to wonder about the logic of a course that was offered completely free – no charge for even room and board?! I could understand that they didn’t want to charge for the instruction itself since it was noble work and you can’t really put a price tag on it, but out of pocket costs are surely estimable.

As I listened with increasing attention, the registrar smilingly assigned me a room and said, “I am assigning you room 17 on the ground floor; you will be quite comfortable there.” I figured it was good to be located on the ground floor for easy access to the dining area and the walking garden outside. I was then asked to speak with one of his colleagues who would explain some other logistical matters.

This other gentleman, who was equally calm and composed, told me politely that if I wanted to use the laundry service I would have to put down a deposit of Rs 200. I hastily agreed as that amounted to roughly five US dollars and was a miniscule amount to pay for not having to wash my own clothes. The camp where my wife had attended the course did not have a laundry service.

He then proceeded to explain that the cost of the laundry

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service was Rs 5 per item of clothing. The drop off and pick up of the laundry would be from 6:30 am to 8:00 am every morning. This too blew me away – they were going to wash and iron my clothes for ten cents an item, and that too overnight! This was very inexpensive, even for India.

He then handed me my laundry token, which was also number 17. I remarked that the laundry token was conveniently matched to the room number. He said that wasn't the case, but it was 'lucky' that I got the same number as my room for the laundry token. His remark made me pause; something that I would have considered a mere coincidence, was seemingly 'lucky' to this person. I thought he must be superstitious or believe in numerology, or both. He then asked me to turn in my valuables, electronic devices and any reading and writing materials for the duration of the program.

My wife had prepared me for the rule prohibiting outside communications, reading and writing materials, but actually having to turn these items over for a period of ten days felt like asking for the impossible of someone like me who is used to being switched on all the time! I asked for some time to pull everything together, and headed towards my assigned room to really think through whether I was ready to give all of these items up for the next ten days, and if there was anything I might want to keep. After all, turning in all these items was based on an honour system – who was going to know if I held one or two items back?

Then I recalled the code of discipline that I had committed to complying with fully and completely. I checked my emails one last time and went back to the registration

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counter and turned everything in and received another token (this time number 12) for my valuables, electronic devices, notebooks, two paperback books and miscellaneous valuables. I decided to hold on to my wristwatch as clocks were noticeably absent in most areas.

I went to my room to unpack and check out the facilities, but it seemed like the room I was assigned was already occupied. I went back to the registrar who reassigned me to room 19, which was right next door. I thought to myself that the ‘lucky’ number 17 was a coincidence after all, and smiled. I reflected upon how different my thinking was from the registrar’s. Having wrapped up my time at the camp, I do truly feel I was really lucky to have been there and to undergo the life-altering experience that I did. It couldn’t have been a sheer coincidence that brought me there.

My sleeping room was a picture of minimalistic living. There was a bed made out of a granite slab hoisted on a three-foot stump of concrete with enough room for one person to sleep reasonably comfortably, a large cushion on the floor which looked like it was for meditating, a drying line for clothes, some shelves built into the wall, a broom and a dust pan. No chairs, table or any other furniture. There was, however, an electronic mosquito repellent, a mosquito net folded up and placed in one of the shelves, a ceiling fan and an air conditioning unit. The organisers had their priorities right! Mumbai can be very hot and humid in the summer, and mosquitoes are perennially around to add more excitement to the torrid mix.

Then I ventured into the bathroom which was equally bare-boned – a tiny sink, a mirror, a small hook to hang a



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towel, a shower and a toilet. I again noticed some cleaning supplies in one of the shelves on the window casing. This wasn't the Maurya Sheraton where I spent the night when I flew into Delhi, but I told myself that it would do for the next ten days. After all, I was there to meditate.

I unpacked a bit but then realised that there wasn't a clean shelf to put my clothes on, so I put them back into my suitcase. There wasn't much to house my things in general apart from the stoney head of the bed, which became my temporary night-stand for miscellaneous items.

With little to do in my room and without my electronic devices, I wandered out into the hallway towards the dining room. It was close to 5 pm now and I saw people lining up for some food. I followed knowing that dinner would not be served, so I might as well see what was being offered at tea time. I picked up a wide-rimmed metal plate like everyone else and wiped it with a drying towel that was kept for that purpose. The food was stored in interesting looking metal warmers.

To my delight there were hot food items – *idli-sambar* (rice cakes with lentil curry) – whereas my wife had prepared me to expect a piece or two of fruit with tea. I figured this must be the benefit of attending the 'executive' program. After all, you can't expect important business people to skip dinner altogether and settle for a few pieces of fruit as their final meal of the day. I made a mental note to tell my wife that I certainly must be at one of the five-star *Vipassana* locations, which seemed relatively true compared to the Massachusetts centre, where my wife had to share a room with two other female students.

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It wasn't too long after I strolled outside for a short walk after some tea and snacks that I heard an old style gong ring loudly at 6 pm. I didn't know what it was for as the course officially began at 7 pm. I started following the throng of all the other students, which was headed towards the connecting door to the dining hall for female students. Here two sets of chairs were neatly arranged, one for men on the side closer to the male dining hall and another set for women towards the other end.

As we all bustled into the longish hall, I remembered my first day of graduate school orientation and it felt good to be at a place of learning after many years of corporate life. Shortly after we were all seated, a person dressed in a simple kurta-pajama appeared and started to speak into a microphone that was fitted with an amplifier and speaker system.

This was where the fun began. The speaker welcomed us to the program and explained that this was the pre-talk before the official start of the program, where questions could be answered before we started observing the silence. He started with going over some of the rules and guidelines. I thought to myself that this process was certainly overdone in re-reminding us of our to-be regimented lifestyle; this was the third time we were going over the course regulations in one form or another. In retrospect, I now understand why this was done over and over. In any case, here is what was outlined.

- 1) We were to maintain *arya maun* (noble silence) from the start of the program till 10 am on the tenth day. Since noble silence means silence of the body, speech, and mind, not only could we not speak to another student, we were not to make any eye

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contact, physically touch, make hand gestures or even communicate through hand written notes! All this was strictly forbidden and would be monitored quite seriously.

The only person we could speak with was the conducting teacher, if truly necessary, or during the 30 minute Q&A sessions twice a day. We could also interact with a set of *dharma sevaks* (*Dhamma* servers), but only for material needs related to food or accommodation. This was to be done by writing our requests on small slips of paper that were provided and placing them into a small box in the dining hall marked ‘Requirements’.

- 2) Complete segregation of sexes had to be observed at the camp throughout. Even couples who were attending the program together would stay in separate quarters and could not talk or meet during the entire course.
- 3) Any religious items such as talismans, rosaries, sacred threads and the like were not to be brought into the camp. If any of these sorts of items were brought in inadvertently, they must be deposited with the management for safekeeping for the entire duration of the course.
- 4) Clothing was to be modest and in keeping with the local culture. Decorum must be maintained in dressing due to the serious nature of the work. Backs, chests and legs must be kept covered even if it was warm. Women were forbidden from wearing tight, revealing or transparent dresses.

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- 5) We were reminded about the no external communication, reading and writing rule.
- 6) Students were to maintain cleanliness standards as we would meditate in common areas. Daily bathing and clean clothes were a must, for which laundry service was provided at a nominal cost.
- 7) We were not to make any contact with the outside world and also remain within the designated four walls of the separate male and female quarters for the entire ten-day period.
- 8) Students were required to clean their own rooms and bathrooms, supplies for which were provided in each suite. Aha, this explained the broom and other cleaning items!
- 9) Students were not to wear any make up, any heavy jewellery, or use cosmetics and perfumes that might emit an odour that could distract other students from being able to concentrate while meditating.
- 10) Finally came the tall order stuff, at least in my view.
  - No consumption of intoxicants or drugs of any sort – alcohol, cigarettes, etc. Use of prescription drug had to be pre-approved by the conducting teacher.
  - Complete abstinence from any sexual activity.
  - No telling of lies or stating untruths or misrepresenting facts. Since we weren't to interact with other students, this specifically pertained to exaggeration or deflation of information when describing responses to the meditation technique to the conducting teacher.

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- No killing of any living being, no matter how small or insignificant.
- No stealing.

Once through with the rules, the speaker moved on to explain the daily schedule, which was also posted on a huge poster outside both dining halls so there was no ambiguity about it! He went on to explain that we would be woken up at 4 am and that a full day of meditation would start promptly at 4:30 am with a break for breakfast from 6:30 to 8:00 am, group meditation from 8:00 to 9:00 am, followed by instructions, check-in on individual progress and more meditation before breaking for lunch and relaxation from 11:00 am to 1:00 pm.

Individual meditation would then begin from 1:00 to 2:30 pm, group meditation from 2:30 to 3:30 pm, brief instructions, more meditation till tea-time from 5:00 to 6:00 pm and then group meditation from 6:00 to 7:00 pm followed by evening discourse and final meditation until approximately 9:00 pm with a short break in between. There were two 30-minute slots for formal Q&A with the conducting teacher from 12:00 to 12:30 pm and 9:00 to 9:30 pm. Lights out at 9:30 pm. Sleep time from 9:30 pm to 4:00 am. Repeat the same process for ten full days.

I think this was when it truly sunk in what we all had signed up for. At this point, the speaker genuinely asked if there was anyone who would like to opt out of the program and leave the camp, and said that the organisers would completely understand and not be in the least bit offended. However, once we had agreed to the ground rules and complete adherence to the demanding schedule, there was

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no turning back and that we couldn't leave at any later stage in the program until its full completion.

The 'welcome to the boot camp' briefing was finally over for the trainee cadets. I heard a little shuffling of feet and wondered if anyone would actually get up and leave. No sir, every one of the 104 (63 men and 41 women) students stayed put in their respective chairs.

There was pin-drop silence at this point in the room and the speaker put down the microphone to take questions. One of the female students asked whether we could take notes during the evening discourse. The speaker gently responded that the idea was for us to simply listen and absorb the process so note-taking was not permitted; besides, the room where the discourses would take place was too dimly lit to allow for any writing.

A few other questions were about logistical provisions. Someone wanted to know if they could be contacted by their family in the case of an emergency. The speaker explained that all incoming calls would be dealt with based on the nature of the situation but reminded them that the goal was to avoid all outside contact so we could experience a completely immersive program free of distractions.

I was dying to ask when they were going to talk about dealing with 'business stress' as there had been no mention of it in the daily schedule outlined earlier and it had certainly been one of my chief motivations in attending this special executive curriculum. I raised my hand sheepishly knowing I risked looking like a corporate brat, but went ahead and asked what was on my mind anyway. The speaker smiled and said the course was exactly the same one offered in all

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the *Vipassana* centres around the world.

I was grateful that someone else asked the follow up, “So what’s different about this executive program?” I was surprised by the explanation that the ‘executive’ aspects of the program were basically the nicer accommodation (i.e., single air-conditioned rooms for students) and the laundry service! The executive camp provisions were such that people from the business world who were used to a luxurious and comfortable lifestyle didn’t feel discouraged from attending the program because of material discomforts.

A breath of despair escaped me as I sat back in my chair, thinking that my primary expectation about learning to relieve work-related stress wasn’t going to be addressed through this program. Ah well, I wasn’t about to become the first student to get up and walk out. Besides, where would I go for the next few days if I left the camp? Back to Singapore, or stay in Mumbai as my wife still had another week of work and I was technically supposed to be vacationing.

I had already activated my out-of-office email response and had no desire to deactivate it, now that I had an opportunity to switch off completely for ten full days at a stretch. Reconciling myself to the prospect of an email-free existence of over a week, I forged ahead to the meditation *Dhamma* Hall for the introductory session.

The *Dhamma* Hall was a fairly large rectangular room with two sides for men and women clearly demarcated separately. There was a dais in between with two largish sofa-like chairs in the front. Square cushions, similar to the one in my room and large enough for one person to sit comfortably on, were neatly arranged in a matrixed fashion

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throughout the room.

We were called up individually by name and motioned to our designated meditation spots. I was assigned the F-1 spot, which was the first seat down the middle in the sixth and last row. With my typical front row student tendencies kicking in, I felt a bit too far away from the action. The old (i.e., repeat) students were the ones who occupied the prized front row seats, or so I had observed from the initial roll call when the pre-assigned spots were given to us.

We all slowly settled into our seats and the two *sahayak acharyas* (conducting teachers) appeared, one male and one female instructor, and seated themselves at the front on similar special chairs right next to and below the dais, but not on it. The *dharma sevaks* were seated on meditation cushions near the instructors. There was also a contraption that looked like a makeshift amplification system hooked onto a tape recorder next to the male instructor's chair.

I remembered my wife telling me that the entire instruction was done with a cassette recorder that played audio instructions recorded by *Guruji* Goenka, to ensure consistency of the process in all *Vipassana* centres throughout the world. The *dharma sevaks* drew all the curtains tightly to the corners of the windows so that not a single ray of outside light entered the room. At this point, the indoor lighting was also turned off completely and a zero-wattage set of lamps came on to provide some diffuse lighting to the room.

With the room quiet and with minimal lighting, the male teacher pushed the play button on the cassette tape player. A deeply guttural voice streamed through, chanting what sounded like old Sanskrit or Pali *shlokas* (hymns). After



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a few minutes of the chants, the voice started providing instructions for us – two sets separately in both English and Hindi – to start the learning process.

To commence the program, we were asked to take a holy oath of complete surrender towards following the ten-day process, i.e., completely setting aside any other viewpoints and doubts and allowing a certain level of ingoing belief for the program to benefit us. We were promised that we would get answers to all our questions as the course progressed and assured that the technique was a known and proven process and that we should give it an honest chance.

We took the following oath, which is well known from the time of the teachings of the Buddha, for the next ten days:

*“Buddham Saranam Gacchami  
Dhammam Saranam Gacchami  
Sangham Saranam Gacchami”*

Which essentially means, “I promise to walk the path of Buddha (Enlightened One), the path of *Dhamma* (the principles of absolute truth), and *sangha* (the noble community of the Enlightened One’s disciples)”. *Guruji* clarified that *buddha* is not synonymous with Siddhartha Gautama as the word *buddha* can refer to anyone who has achieved complete enlightenment and mastery over the mind. I couldn’t distinguish the subtle nuance then but it started to make sense much later in the program.

The main charge for the evening and for the following day was to observe our own breathing. It wasn’t a breathing exercise or an attempt to gain control over breathing, but simply to observe and become familiar with our own breath

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as it enters and exists through the nose. There wasn't much logic offered but the idea was to build greater awareness of oneself, so it seemed like a reasonable thing to start with. I didn't realise that it's not easy to observe our own breathing because we breathe involuntarily and continuously.

For the next hour or so, all we did was try to feel our ingoing and outgoing breath. This is called *Aana Pana* in the Pali language. I was becoming intrigued by the process and soldiered on cautiously. There wasn't a compelling reason to quit because we weren't being introduced to any religious practices, which I had said to myself upfront, would be a good enough reason to exit the program at any point because I hadn't come in for any kind of religious indoctrination. Experiencing my breath go in and out was certainly something I could do, at least for the next little while. The session concluded with another brief round of chants from *Gurujī*, though no one else was chanting along.

The lights came on and the instructor reminded us about the 4 am start the following morning. I dashed out to write in a request for an alarm clock as having turned in my Blackberry and mobile phone, I had no way of setting a 4 am alarm for myself. The alarm clock didn't arrive that night and I hoped that somehow I might wake up early anyway as I had woken up at 5 am that morning to start my drive to Delhi.

It had been a long and unexpectedly eventful day, leaving the festivities of a destination wedding resort to starting out at a monastic meditation camp in unfamiliar surroundings.

*Day 1*

## Sleepy Skepticism



I was woken up by the sound of the loud gong from the hallway outside my room at 4 am. Two minutes later there was a knock on my door. It was one of the *dharma sevak*s checking to make sure I got up on time since they hadn't been able to provide me with the alarm clock the night before. I thanked him and told him I wouldn't be needing the alarm clock after all, thinking that it was impossible to miss the hard clanging and repeated sound of the gong. I tried to shake off the sleep from my eyes and headed into the bathroom to take a shower.

We had been advised that there would be running hot water available, possibly to make it comfortable to take a shower in the wee hours of the morning. Exploring the water faucets, I realised that the wall shower only ran ice-cold water and in order to get warm water, I would have to

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use the hot and cold water taps at the bottom, mix them in adequate ratios to fill up a bucket at lukewarm temperature, and pour it onto myself in mugfuls in order to bathe.

This was the typical Indian bathing system, but having been out of India for over a decade, the bucket system just didn't work for me anymore as I was addicted to the soothing sensation of water flowing over my body from a shower-head without me lifting a finger and enjoying the nice cleansing feeling of the water's force. I had to choose between having a cold shower or doing the water-mixing thing. I braved the chilling sensation of the cold water and felt more refreshed and certainly wide awake.

At 4:20 am, I heard the sound of someone walking through the hallway with a tinkling bell of sorts (the type that's called a *ghanti* in India). This was the reminder wake up, I figured, for those who might still be snoozing. It was clear that these guys meant business when they said the meditation starts promptly at 4:30 am.

Students started trickling into the *Dhamma* Hall located on the second floor. It was an eerie feeling to be doing a group activity with 100 other people before the crack of dawn! The conducting teachers weren't there, nor the voice of *Guruji* streaming from the speakers, so we understood that we were supposed to follow the instructions from last night and practice meditating on our own.

I sat down on my designated cushion in the cross-legged position, put my hands on my knees and closed my eyes to start the meditation process. We had essentially been instructed to focus on the sensations associated with the process of inhaling and exhaling. As I tried to put my

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mind to it, I realised it wasn't easy to feel my own breathing process at its natural pace. Obviously, we can all experience heavy breathing or when our breath has quickened.

Secondly, it was nearly impossible to try and maintain concentration on the breath itself. My mind would wander off rapidly to all sorts of other things ranging from "There are some droplets of water in my earlobes as I didn't have enough time to dry off after my shower in the haste to be on time," to "Hope this process actually delivers what it advertises," to "Wonder when and whether they might start religious discourse on us," to "The guy sitting diagonally to my left sure shifts around a lot!". Racing from one unrelated thought to the next, I kept trying to bring my mind to the task at hand, even if I had to quicken my breath a little to be able to notice it perceptibly.

Sitting cross-legged in one spot for more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time is harder than it seems. I shifted around quite a bit, as did everyone else. I kicked myself for not wearing my watch as there was no way to know how I was tracking towards the 6:30 am end point as the only wall clock in the room was directly overhead. Probably an hour had passed when I realised I had dozed off, for how long, I didn't know. I snapped back to attention with my head bobbing forward.

I was lucky I wasn't one of the other students who was woken up by one of the *dharma sevaks*, who came and gently tugged at the sleeping student's cushion from one end! The 'no sleeping allowed in the meditation room' policy seemed to be policed fairly strictly and I was fortunate not to be rebuked for my transgression. I managed to pull through

## THE EQUANIMOUS MIND

until 6:30 am, stealing glances at other students' watches during my posture adjustment breaks, and counting down the remaining hour, minutes and seconds.

I got up somehow given the numbing stiffness I was feeling in my back and lower body, walked back to my room and sat down on my bed. I looked at the roof and asked myself whether I could really do this day in and day out for another ten days. Not having had any dinner the night before, my belly encouraged me to think things over some breakfast for which the gong was sounded again. I first pulled together 15 pieces of clothing that needed laundering, given the back-log from the last several days of travel. I dropped off the pile at a counter-top outside the dining hall and walked inside to line up for breakfast.

I was getting used to the wipe-your-own-plate ritual by now. Today's main item was *poha*, a common breakfast snack in western Indian made of flattened rice wafers, something my wife would fix somewhat infrequently given our staple breakfast of cereal or eggs. There was also ketchup available, which I pretty much used with most breakfast items aside from cereal. Further encouraged, I stepped forward and noticed some dates kept in a large box, followed by bananas and cut papaya. Having had a chronic aversion to papaya since childhood (never understood nor remembered why), I grabbed a couple of bananas and found a place to put down my fully-loaded platter.

I went back looking for a hot drink and found three heated flasks, with different labels for 'Indian Tea', 'Black Tea' and 'Milk'. This was clearly the 'executive' *Vipassana* centre as they had the thoughtfulness to offer black tea,

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which is fairly uncommon in most of India. Being a black tea drinker, I headed straight down the middle to fill up my cup. Taking a few sips walking back towards my spot in the dining hall, I tasted a distinct tang of ginger, which is my favourite complement to tea. After filling myself on *poha*, dates, bananas, and washing it all down with ginger black tea, I concluded that the breakfast at the camp was certainly a wholesome meal.

I went back to my room and collapsed on my bed till I woke up with a start when the gong chimed again at 7:50 am. Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I headed up to the *Dhamma* Hall again for the first group meditation session of the day. Right at the hour, the conducting teachers came in, and after the lights were dimmed, the cassette player came into action again. After some brief chants from *Guruji* came some more instructions.

The main instructional addition from the previous night was that during meditation, it's natural that concentration often wanders away because the mind is intrinsically mischievous and prone to distraction, but we shouldn't feel disappointed when we lose concentration from the goal of trying to observe our breathing. It made sense from life experiences that it wasn't easy to focus the mind on one thing for more than a little while (minutes, seconds, or sometimes even microseconds and nanoseconds are often all it takes for the mind to be distracted!) but the idea of not associating any negative feelings when the mind gets distracted from the job at hand was a new concept.

With the added instruction, we started practicing the observation process for the next hour. Fairly slowly

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and somewhat noticeably, through patient practice in the moments when I could maintain my concentration, I started to feel the air going in and out of my nostrils without having to hasten the breathing process. I also realised that it was much easier to concentrate with my eyes closed than keeping them open; it made sense that external visual stimuli were a source of distraction and stole focus away from the inwardly oriented task of observing my breathing.

I shifted my posture fewer times in this hour-long session than in the previous one and opened my eyes less frequently to steal glances at others' watches to follow the progress of time. I still hadn't worn my own watch to the *Dhamma* Hall, this time purposefully. Knowing my restless nature, it would have been a huge source of distraction during the meditation session.

With the hour over, we took a short break before returning for some more instructions. Essentially, these emphasised the need to work on meditating with a calm and quiet, yet an alert and attentive mind and to maintain equanimity, as the mind wanders off during the process of maintaining focused concentration around our breathing. After a little more practice, we were encouraged to get some rest and permitted to go back to our sleeping rooms.

I went outside for a brief stroll to clear my head and it was soon time for lunch at 11 am. Lunch was fairly extensive although it didn't come close to the breakfast experience. With less than a 24-hour data set of observations, I presumptively concluded that breakfast was the best meal of the day at the camp and made a mental note to go all out in subsequent mornings. I came back to my room and fell



## DAY 1 – SLEEPY SKEPTICISM

fast asleep once again to be woken up by what had to be the loudest and most fool-proof alarm system in the world!

I noticed some changing scenery as I slumbered back to my spot in the *Dhamma* Hall a few minutes before 1 pm. Many people were approaching the conducting teacher to ask permission to move their cushions to the rear wall as they weren't comfortable sitting upright on their cushions for the entire hour without any back support. Some other people were appealing to move off the cushions entirely and be allowed to be seated in chairs instead.

Despite the chronic back pain which had been bothering me during the sessions, I told myself that there was no way I would draw meaningful benefit from this process if I couldn't even follow the most basic requirement of sitting upright in the cross-legged position to meditate. This turned out to be a very good decision later down the road, although I continued to struggle with the pain for quite some time.

It also didn't hurt that the two of the uncomfortable people cleared out from in front of me and I felt a lot less claustrophobic and able to concentrate on my breathing observation process much better. With the furniture adjustment in the *Dhamma* Hall complete, we proceeded to start the meditation session to focus on observing our breathing.

I'm not sure whether it was the food at lunch or something else, but during the session I started rocking back and forth and sometimes in a circular motion while trying to meditate. The rocking motion certainly induced more somnolence and I caught myself dozing off on multiple occasions during the session.

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Blissfully ignorant, I thought that sleepiness was a sure sign that the process must be working on me because I was under the impression that meditation was a form of hypnosis, where the person enters a trance-like state and starts to see things more clearly! I found it hard to stay awake in this session and focused my efforts to fighting the forces of cradle-rocking slumber.

After the post-session instructions, the conducting teacher called us up in small groups of three to five *sadhaks* (student meditators) to check up on our progress. *Guriji* had reminded us in one of the instruction periods to neither exaggerate nor understate our experiences with the technique as we had taken vows to speak no untruths during the camp. I waited a while for my turn as our conducting teacher was very patient and took the time to hear from each student and answer any questions (about the technique but not the theory of *Vipassana*, as that was something *Guriji* had cautioned could lead to mindless debate).

An hour in, I was called up with a group of two other *sadhaks*. When asked, I honestly expressed feeling sleepy and rocking in a circle and sideways when trying to meditate. The instructor said these were common obstacles to meditative efforts in the initial stages. Obstacles?! I was just beginning to think that the process was working on me because it was all very trance-like and therefore meditative.

With my bubble pricked, I went back to my room and lay on the bed staring at the ceiling wondering what in the world I was doing there. I calculated that if I quit the program now, I could join my wife in a couple of days when she started her one-week vacation to India. I started

## DAY 1 – SLEEPY SKEPTICISM

calculating the practical constraints (how would I make travel arrangements without a phone or access to email, what would I say to the conducting teacher about the reason for wanting to leave) and pondering over the philosophical considerations – I had never quit when the chips were down. Who knows? Maybe things would change and I might see the light soon...

The gong announced tea-time and I lumbered into the dining hall and was met with an unpleasant surprise – the snack *du jour* was bananas, cut watermelon, papaya and some *chiwda* (Indian style salted wafers)! There were no metal food warmers in sight so it was clear what I saw was all there was to eat, and I knew there wouldn't be any dinner.

This was certainly a big step down from the previous evening's hot snack. Now I knew that my wife wasn't kidding when she said that the evening snack with tea was just a few pieces of fruit. Somewhat in denial and thinking wishfully, I wandered around the dining hall, checking to see if there was some real food tucked away elsewhere.

No other solid food, but I discovered an additional thermos flask labeled 'Ginger Water'. Sufficiently intrigued and reconciled with the minimalistic snack as the last meal for the day and trying not to focus on the fact that breakfast was still a good 13 hours away, I poured myself a cup of this hot drink.

It was probably the most nourishing simple drink I had ever sipped, with almost a divinely soothing feel as it flowed down my parched throat. I stuffed myself on my share of the *chiwda* and tried to shake off thoughts of quitting

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the program. It was time for the 6 pm mandatory group meditation, which was to be followed by the first evening discourse, which still held some curiosity for me.

Unable to even exchange glances with other students to get a sense of what they were experiencing, I didn't know if I was alone in my doubts about the effectiveness or relevance of the process for me. I had noticed that there were over 15 old students during the initial roll call which at least meant that some people found enough value from the technique that they had come back for another time to endure the ten-day long ordeal. I found out later that one of the students, an Australian, had been coming to the camp every single year for 19 straight years!

Cycling back and forth between doubt and hope, I made myself as comfortable as possible for the 6 pm session. I had real difficulty concentrating and impatiently awaited the end of the session so as to get on with the evening discourse. After the session, the instructor announced that the discourses would be offered separately in English and Hindi. I later discovered that all *Vipassana* centres offer the instructions and discourse in multiple languages, typically English and the primary local language where the course is offered, and (when possible) any other languages that are represented in the student body attending the camp.

The Hindi discourse was in the main *Dhamma* Hall and the English one would be set up in separate male and female mini *Dhamma* Halls. This was a tough choice and I only had a few minutes to make up my mind. For several people, it was a straightforward one. All the foreign students and several others hastily moved to the mini *Dhamma* Halls

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for the English discourse.

Although fluent in both English and Hindi, having lived outside India for a long time, I had somewhat lost touch with my native tongue. I had noticed from the dual language cassette recordings we had heard thus far that *Guruji's* Hindi instructions were well articulated and frequently used some words that either sounded unfamiliar to me or I had forgotten them over the years.

I had to follow the meaning of these pure Hindi words either in reference to their context in the instructions or by comparison with the English translation that would follow. This would be tougher now because the discourse would only be in one language in one room so there was no opportunity to compare and interpret the meaning from the simultaneous translation as was possible with the dual-language meditation instructions.

I also couldn't recall whether my wife had preferred the English or Hindi discourse when she had attended her *Vipassana* camp. Often when I have considered what my wife would do in the same situation, it has helped lead me to the right answer, be it the same or the exact opposite choice. I surmised that she must have attended the English one because, though Indian by birth, she grew up outside of India and I also thought that perhaps the Massachusetts location might only offer the discourses in English.

Despite logically deducing that my wife attended the discourses in English, something from within prompted me to stay put in the main *Dhamma* Hall and listen to the Hindi one. Even in the worst of cases, if I couldn't follow the Hindi discourse, I could quietly walk out and go to the

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mini *Dhamma* Hall. However, it would be much harder to do the reverse and walk back into the main *Dhamma* Hall in the dark without being disruptive, especially since my cushion was as far away as possible from the entrance door within the male section.

The video discourse started promptly at 7:15 pm and I saw *Gurujī* Goenka for the first time – a full head of white hair, calm face, looking like he was in his late sixties though I had heard that he was well over eighty years old now. He started with stating matter-of-factly that the first day of meditation was over, and there were nine more days left in the camp to learn the art of *Vipassana*. He then proceeded to provide explanations for everything we had experienced during the day.

The logic behind observing our breath was because the process of breathing serves as a medium for our conscious mind to connect with the unconscious (inner) mind. Breathing being a continuous and involuntary activity also serves as a good ongoing process to focus the mind's attention. He rhetorically asked if we were finding the process to be difficult.

Jokingly, he reminded us not to overeat during lunch now that we knew there was no dinner served because stuffing ourselves with food would interfere with the practice of meditation. I was a testament to the fact that it was difficult to stay awake, let alone meditate well, during the post lunch session after an over-filling meal!

He went on to clarify that *Vipassana* is not a religious practice – Buddhist or otherwise – and hence no chanting of the name of God or a superbeing was involved. The

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technique, however, is the same that Siddhartha Gautama used to attain enlightenment and become the Buddha. Apparently, Buddha's disciples carried on this practice for 500 years without it being lost in translation, after which it eventually became extinct in India.

When *Vipassana* had gained popularity over two centuries ago given its value, it had also spread to many of India's neighbouring countries, one of which was Burma (now Myanmar). Here it was carefully nourished by a small group of people in the classic guru-disciple learning ideology, and had now been brought back to the country where Buddha originally taught and practiced it. This was very comforting to hear because I had been concerned that there might perhaps be some religious underpinnings involved in learning the technique.

He explained that breathing observation is one way to sharpen the mind's concentration but wasn't the end goal of our meditation. He pointed out that the mind is prone to two types of activities when it is not fully under our control; it is either reflecting on things from the past or anticipating things in the future. Also, it is either evaluating these experiences (or expecting these potential events) as positive or negative, favourable or unfavourable.

As the mind wanders, it cycles back and forth between such thoughts in a completely haphazard random walk sort of way and exhausts itself. It's unproductive to dwell on the past or imagine the future because neither time frame is in our control. I have known this intellectually for as long as I can remember and the whole world knows this in principle, but *Guruji* had drawn the link at the psychological level and

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explained how through further self observations, the link would become even clearer.

He went on to explain that the processes of *Ana Pana* and *Vipassana* meditation were based on the tenet that we like to characterise in simple terms as ‘seeing is believing’. Only when we experience certain realities transpiring on our own physical body does the unconscious mind get trained to believe them, much like the breath coming in and going out through our nostrils is the only reality that the mind observes when focusing on it in the moment. The previous breath that is gone is in the past and no longer relevant to ruminate over, nor is it worthwhile to guess what the next incoming breath would be like. As such, we must calmly maintain focus on the present sensations.

*Guruji* then outlined that through the breathing process, in due course of time and with continuous effort, we can reach the deeper portals of the inner (unconscious) mind and cleanse it of its inherent tendency to cycle back and forth between the past and the future and focus it solely on the present. While I had some intellectual grasp over this concept, the experiential aha-moment only came when I connected the dots between my thus far theoretical appreciation with the activity we had undertaken all day and its practice.

Suddenly, the clouds of doubt and skepticism were beginning to evaporate, at least partially. So far, there was no flaw in the logic and my own experiments all day had borne out the theory being postulated. For someone who makes a living in finding opportunities to critique business practices and recommend changes, I had found it hard to



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find a loophole thus far.

Listening now with increased interest, I heard *Guruji* clarify why we were made to agree to following certain codes of conduct upfront. The idea was that we can't work on learning the technique with a polluted mind that wasn't free of all kinds of 'sinful activities'. These were prohibited not because they are considered unethical or sacrilegious, but because doing them can cause the unconscious mind to create negative sensations within the body. These sensations, whether pleasant or unpleasant, lead to either cravings (*raagas*) or aversions (*dveshas*), which make it harder for the mind to concentrate.

The logic of the case still completely air-tight, *Guruji* next drew the analogy between the *Vipassana* learning process at the camp with us going through a major surgery on the unconscious mind and how it was extremely important to not let any outside infections enter the body when it was on the operating table. This could happen in the form of breaking the noble silence, making contact with the outside world, or not following the code of discipline in any other way.

Finally, he reminded us that we had left our vocations, our families and our entire lives for a full ten-day period, which was a significant commitment and sacrifice, so we may as well draw maximum value from the experience. He encouraged us to stay strong and work very diligently and follow the instructions carefully to reap the most benefit from the program. We were also asked to resolve to closely follow the course timetable. Although strict, it was designed with careful consideration to ensure that the learning was

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deeply ingrained into our minds.

The one thing I found particularly clever about the instruction process was that contrary to typical learning techniques, where the theory is offered before students are asked to validate it through experiment, we were made to do the exact opposite at the camp. Case in point, the task for the day was only outlined as a mechanised step-by-step process instruction the previous night, without offering any rationale for why we were observing our breath.

The logical explanation only came later, so we could draw the connection based on what *we* had actually experienced without a theory bias versus what our mind was telling us to experience because we were expected to do so, as predicted by the theory which we would have learned previously!

I smiled in admiration of a smarter way to education, which was not just learn by doing, but learn only that and only as much as what we experience versus what we are supposed to experience. In other words, two different students can experience two different things. But that is what the reality is for them, and not what the other student might have experienced, and possibly altogether different from what the textbook predicates.

It did feel more logical to witness reality on an ‘as experienced by oneself only’ basis as opposed to imagining a certain reality because either that’s what we want to believe or what others want us to believe. The gears in the machinery of my mind started turning as I translated this very simple physiological experiential learning to my own life’s orientation.

## DAY 1 – SLEEPY SKEPTICISM

There was an overabundance of ‘should voices’ in my head – what I needed to do to be a good consultant, a loving husband, a worthy son, a caring brother, a supportive friend, and the list went on...versus experiencing life as it came and making sense of it on my own. The mind-awakening process was slowly but clearly beginning without formally being asked to consider these possibilities, which were appearing unprompted and naturally to me through self-experience, and not imposed by any theoretical underpinnings.

Feeling inspired to continue on for one more day, or at least the first half of the next day, I tuned in to listen to the tape-recorded instructions for the following day. *Guruji* instructed that in addition to noticing the breath going in and out, we now also need to pay attention to a few more things: which nostril was the breath coming in and out from, what sort of sensations were being experienced in and around the nostrils and above the area on the upper lip and below the nose. We practiced these new observational inquiries for 15 minutes before being dismissed for the day at 9 pm.

The process was getting interestingly fascinating and increasingly difficult. It wasn’t easy to notice my own breathing to begin with, and now to note which nostril was in use was quite a challenge. I also sat back and wondered why I had never myself considered to test first hand how the essential-to-life breathing process really worked. With this intrigue in mind, I went to bed feeling less skeptical and with more anticipation for the rest of the program.



*Day 2*

## Neurobiological Detox



I was beginning to get used to being woken up by the loud sound of the gong. It was a sprint to shower and get ready to reach the *Dhamma* Hall by 4:30 am – everything happens in slow motion at 4 am! Thankfully, the conducting teacher had suggested that it was optimal for new students, to meditate for only one hour at a time to see best results. That translated into deciding whether I wanted to meditate from 4:30 to 5:30 am or 5:30 to 6:30 am during the early morning session.

Knowing myself, any other choice of an hour long slot, such as an in-between one like 5:15 to 6:15 am, in the two-hour time window would have simply resulted in lack of discipline on my part. I was more likely to adhere to either starting at 4:30 am or ending at 6:30 am because both were book-ended with some hard routine event outside

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my control. The earlier one with the impossible-to-sleep-through communal alarm at 4:00 am at the front end and the later one with the start of breakfast at 6:30 am at the back end.

I had asked the conducting teacher which hour he would recommend between the two. He had said that in general either was fine but when I had persisted with my query, he suggested that *brahma mahurat* (pre-dawn) is particularly auspicious and beneficial. I surmised that the logic was that there is nearly no external activity at that hour which makes it much easier to concentrate.

Besides, with the universal alarm going off at 4:00 am anyway, and then the tinkling bells continuing all the way until 4:30 am, I thought I may as well bite the bullet and go for the first slot and also draw upon the auspicious morning hour! I also reasoned that it would be better to meditate for an hour, then come back and nap for an hour before the breakfast gong sounds at 6:30 am.

I located my cushion in the *Dhamma* Hall at 4:32 am, made myself as comfortable as possible, and started the process of observing my breath and also trying to follow which nostril was in use and what sensations I was feeling in the nasal area and above the upper lip. Observing the breath was one thing but to determine whether the left, or the right, or both nostrils simultaneously were in use was a totally different matter. For a while, I told myself to focus on which nostril was in use and not worry about the other sensations but later found it easier to feel the breath going over the upper lip (moustache area) than to determine which nostril was in use.

## *DAY 2 – NEUROBIOLOGICAL DETOX*

I started wondering why I had never considered the idea of observing my own breath in what would soon be 35 full years of my life! All those years of biology coursework in junior school, we were too busy cramming in technical nomenclature for anatomical details of the human body and never paused to experience how the most vital process of our existence actually works. It was another example of my mindset and orientation that took simple yet essential things as a given, like maintaining harmonious relationships with those with whom I spend most of my work or family hours.

Once I was done kicking myself for not being more aware of myself, I tried to focus my mind on the act of observation. This in itself was another reminder of the sort of life I had been living for too long – one in which I am never sitting still and experiencing the world around me as it exists and happens, but always doing something or acting on something.

Therefore, the only world I had been experiencing was one in which I also witnessed the reactions of my actions, not a world which was free from the interference of my restless energy and sometimes jarring activity. Suddenly, the world in which I wasn't taking any action and simply observing my breath go in and out of my body, seemed like a more meaningful and serene setting. I wished there would be more time for me to experience such tranquility.

After this hour-long process, I walked out with a very heavy-headed feeling, as though the toxicity deep inside my mind was working its way outwards to the surface. I had to postpone my plans of napping as I felt an urge to take a

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walk outside and clear my head. I wandered out into the walking garden.

There was no one else out as it was still well before dawn. The moon was slowly waning – the night of the wedding I had attended was the auspicious full moon (*poornima*) and the celestial body was now a few days shy of the complete sphere. The lone North Star was up in the sky near the moon and the whole sky seemed to come alive around this combination of heavenly objects.

At sharp 6:00 am, *Guruji*'s voice started streaming through the public address system reciting *shlokas* in a more melodious tone than the occasional chanting in the *Dhamma* Hall. It was a great feeling, words of wisdom flowing out in pure Hindi, Sanskrit or Pali, with the peaceful morning and the outdoor surroundings a perfect environment for me to take all this in.

The activity level soon picked up as other famished meditators were also desperately awaiting the 6:30 am gong to break their 13 hour long overnight fast. I feasted on a hearty round of *dhoklas* (rice and lentil cakes) and the other typical breakfast fare, still steering clear of the cut papayas. I walked for nearly the full hour after breakfast from 7:00 to 8:00 am, as my mind was still mulling over the thoughts from the early morning session.

The 8:00 am mandatory group sitting was announced and I had just enough time to collect my laundry (which was ironed but still somewhat moist; after all, what can you expect for Rs 5 per item), got rid of the light fleece which I had been wearing to avoid catching the morning chill, and headed upstairs to the *Dhamma* Hall. Finally, I felt like



## *DAY 2 – NEUROBIOLOGICAL DETOX*

I was beginning to get a grasp of the method of observing my breath.

I was able to distinguish between the incoming breath which was a little cooler than the outgoing breath, which was distinctly a bit warmer. It made sense as the body temperature was higher than the ambient, so some quick heat transfer occurs as the air enters and exits the body. I knew I had read about the temperature differential between inhaled and exhaled breath somewhere in my school books but had never experienced it on my own body.

I still kept struggling to figure out which nostril was in operation and whether both might even be in use at the same time. Learning to meditate was hard work. Certainly harder than maintaining complete silence.

My mind went back to some of the observations from the earlier session about living in a world where I was thus far oblivious to the fact that everything I saw or experienced was tainted by either my own viewpoint or activities. I tried to take my mind off these thoughts and focus it back on the nostricular aerial inflows and outflows.

The more I tried to avoid introspection, more rapidly thoughts started flowing into my active consciousness. It was as if someone inside my mind was critiquing me and what continued to be reflected back to me were certain behavioural facets of my life, interaction style and external orientation.

1. “I often express my thoughts in a roundabout fashion, which can be confusing to myself and others, and cause unnecessary internal turmoil while costing too much time and peace of mind.”

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2. “I try too hard to please or impress others around me, either with my professional skills, or conversational abilities.”
3. “I sound a bit vain and proud and might even appear disingenuous to some around me. Frankly, I would have trouble believing half the stuff I said if I was being an objective observer!”  
It seemed as if I was listening to myself and characterising it as such.
4. “I often look for external validation, compliments, or sympathy from others on my life’s achievements or distressing situations.”
5. “Though half-jokingly, I often put other people down at social gatherings. I now understand that poking fun at others, however lightly, was actually a way for me to feel better about myself!”

These thoughts were flooding into my consciousness in a tsunami-like fashion and I had to open my eyes to stop the self-infliction of this spontaneous criticism. I noticed that my face was flushed red, my breath had quickened significantly, and there were beads of sweat on my forehead. A dull but intensifying back pain in my lower vertebrae was now accompanying my heavy-headedness.

I was petrified by the idea of closing my eyes again and concentrating on my breath. Before leaving for the program I had told my leadership coach, with whom I had been working for over a year, that the one thing I most feared about going into the program (more so than the ascetic lifestyle and complete silence) was what I might discover about myself during ten days of being alone with

## DAY 2 – NEUROBIOLOGICAL DETOX

my thoughts. My fears were coming true – I was finding out uncomfortable things about myself and it was only the second day!

I pretended to meditate for the rest of the session as this was the mandatory hour and tried not to think about my displeasing introspective revelations. I tried to direct my mind towards an analysis of the technique and the physiological and psychological foundations of how a simple breathing observation process can reveal such facts in a self-evident and accurate manner.

There was no check-up on our progress after group meditation so I slipped away after the instructions, which essentially encouraged us to stay the course despite the initial difficulties in concentrating the mind's focus and learning the breathing observation science. *Guruji* promised that we would experience benefits if we followed instructions and worked sincerely with patience, and that the inner side of our consciousness would awaken. I had no doubt now that I was responding to the technique because of the spontaneous self-revelations from the prior session.

I rushed back to my room and held my head in my hands with the fearful foresight that things were going to get much more ugly and painful if I persisted with the technique and discovered facets of my personality which my conscious mind had trained me to accept as idiosyncrasies that made me the person that I was. After more than an hour of contemplation to consider whether I wanted to know more about my deeper characterological traits, I was willing to take the painful road to potential salvation.

At this point, I realised why noble silence was such

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an essential part of the process. With such thoughts going through my mind, I definitely didn't want to be talking to anyone else about anything consequential. The initial reservation against the complete silence policy turned into gratitude for the privacy of thoughts it ensured.

It didn't register what was served for lunch as my mind was somewhere else. I went to the *Dhamma* Hall instead of practicing meditation in my room for the 1 pm session and tried hard to concentrate on my breathing. Finally, once, twice, I could make out which nostril was getting activated to breathe. I noticed that there was no clear pattern – sometimes one nostril remained the dominant one, and would switch spontaneously to the other, and very rarely would both kick into gear together.

A few moments at a time, as my mind would wander away from the nostricular experimentation, more introspective revelations came to the foreground.

1. “My current path (physical, mental stress and anxiety) is manageable at the moment but not sustainable as I move forward in my personal life and career.”
2. “I should give change a chance, trust my instincts about the process and view this meditation camp as a potential turning point opportunity in my existence.”
3. “I am too attached to life's outcomes and that leads to anxiety-infused behaviour.”
4. “I have too much self-orientation, which gets in the way of my ability to lead others around me with more inspiration.”

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5. “Whenever I have made truly selfless efforts, it was because they were driven from passion, a sense of purpose or service to others. I was happier and led with a liberated conscience. Not only had such efforts resulted in unprecedented change and impact, I had ultimately reaped some rewards even though that wasn’t the motivation for my actions.”

I snapped into attention with my heart pacing 150 beats per minute and tried to quieten my racing mind. I wiped the sweat off my forehead, swallowed a few times and looked straight down at the floor for several minutes before heading back to my room before the hour was over.

My headache was getting more and more uncontrollable and I stepped outside for some fresh air. It was soon time for the 2:30 pm mandatory group meditation hour and I headed back to the *Dhamma* Hall with a sense of greater purpose and resolve. I now purposefully wanted more introspective psychological masochism. Thoughts started coming to me spontaneously as soon as I closed my eyes to start meditating.

1. I often made self-proclamations of my achievements to others – client impact stories, personal life successes, squash victories, bridge tournament wins... and began to think how distasteful it must sound to those around me, especially ones who had heard many stories over and over. Never once did it occur to me that such statements might make others feel inadequate and also potentially indicate a lack of interest in their lives.

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2. I often used guilt to influence others into complying with my needs or desires – from the trivial to the more significant ones – and I was less than pleasant when I didn't get my way.
3. Whether through logic or friendly persuasion, I tried to corner, or 'convince' as I would prefer to believe, people into accepting my views or approach as superior.
4. When offended in a small or significant way, I would quickly interpret the affront as a sign of disrespect, or disloyalty if the insolence was extreme, and was unable to shake off the feeling of being hurt for a long time.
5. In jest, I would infrequently say things about other people, that weren't only critical of their professional performance, but at times their personality or character as well.

Sufficiently disgusted with myself with these intense yet accurate revelations, I felt grateful in a weird sort of way that this technique of self-observation had acquainted me with my unconscious orientation on several important dimensions of my existence. The session ended and I headed to my room to splash my face with cold water.

Staring at the mirror, I suddenly realised that my headache was gone. Continuing to look at myself more closely, I noticed many nearly dislodged whiteheads on my nose and surrounding cheek areas. Upon closer inspection, I realised that this biochemical matter was coming out effortlessly and I scraped off well in excess of what would ever come out in a professional facial cleansing. I washed

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my face again, was feeling lighter, and my facial skin was reflecting a mild glow, as if it had been detoxified from the unwanted negative substance. My brain had certainly emitted enough neurological toxins for one day already.

Evening tea and the group meditation session were uneventful and I was eagerly awaiting the evening's discourse to find out whether what I had experienced during the day was normal. *Guruji* started again by remarking that with the first two days gone, eight more days were left for us to work on learning the science of proper self-observatory introspective meditation. I nodded in acknowledgement, thinking that if we are really going through this self-purification process, ten days are not nearly enough for cleansing the entire load of everything we had done in our past or have become habituated to over years and years of living life a certain way.

I finally understood what Stephen Covey (renowned life coach and author of "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People") meant by, "Our character is nothing but the sum total of our habits". It hit me from the inside how that actually rung true through my own experience and existence. Our habits are basically repeated behaviour patterns, which are induced by our unconscious and conscious choices as we work through and process life's events and situations.

*Guruji* acknowledged that while the second day must have felt slightly easier, the initial difficulties with the technique still must remain for most students. He encouraged us to stay strong because in the aggregate experience of teaching *Vipassana* to several thousand students, most students who left the course partway through for whatever reason typically

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threw in the towel either on the second or the sixth day.

Most of the remainder of the discourse was focused on imparting some essential knowledge that was discovered by the Buddha:

- Desire is the root cause of all misery. I remembered reading this in my junior-high school history book when learning first century Indian history, but at the time had simply committed it to rote memory for exam preparation. It was finally beginning to make some sense.
- When alone with our thoughts, our mind is either reflecting on events (good or bad) from the past, or imagining possibilities (again good or bad) in the future. It spends all its time planning and scheming about avoiding unfavourable events and craving the more favourable ones.

The mind hardly stays focused on the present moment by its own choice and when it does, rarely so in a non-evaluative (neutral) manner. It associates all thoughts as being either positive or negative, relative to the base of our previous experiences or mental conditioning.

- Our body is a factory of wants and needs. The mind is always busy tending to the commands of our bodily needs. Contrary to the desired state of having the mind being the one in charge, it is often the other way round, especially when we experience anything on our own physical being.

I knew it to be true that even something as insignificant as an itch, distracts the mind and it doesn't sit still



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until the itch has been scratched. *Guruji* accurately characterised a life being a slave to one's bodily cravings and aversions as being akin to animalistic living.

- He reminded us that humans are the only living species with the mental ability for introspection. As such, we have the opportunity to be in control of our mind and body, and not be enslaved by them.
- *Guruji* explained Buddha's eight-part middle path to salvation is based on the foundation of *sheel*, *samadhi*, and *pragya*, representing a life of purity, meditative introspection and self-observed knowledge that is experienced first-hand (and not the sort of learning that comes from reading or hearing about something).
- In addition, we must abide by the principles of purity of speech, action, livelihood, effort, awareness and concentration, to lead ourselves towards happiness and liberation.

The discourse wrapped up with a few analogies to drive home the point that we were more likely to believe, especially the inner unconscious mind, what we have actually experienced versus what we read or hear about. My favourite one was that of the man who goes to a restaurant and imagines the food to be delicious by simply reviewing the menu or watching others eat but hasn't tried even a morsel of it himself and tries to decide about the quality of the culinary experience.

I was all for experiential learning over classroom instruction-based knowledge, so this approach was finally

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beginning to grow on me. The conducting teacher didn't have to worry about at least this one student running away from meditation boot camp after the second day.

*Day 3*

## Hard Reboot



Having rested well in a deep sleep with a clean body and mind, I woke up recharged and ready for the long day of meditation ahead. I was beginning to like the feeling of a refreshing cold shower early in the morning. My wake up routine was down to a science by now – every minute was counted out for each activity so I would be ready in 30 minutes flat and I would be seated on my meditation cushion in the *Dhamma* Hall by 4:30 am. The fact that I wasn't shaving helped knock off a good 10-15 minutes from the morning rituals.

Today's exercise was to persist with observing the breathing process and learn to recognise the sensations in and around the nasal area. As I tried to focus my mind towards acknowledging sensations like itching, warmth and moisture, more self observations began to surface.

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1. “I can’t keep reliving my childhood’s painful experiences in my current life. Those must be healed and forgotten, no matter how much hurt they have caused me for a long time. I cannot continue to live my life in their shadows.”
2. “I must stop inflicting all the angst sitting deep inside onto others in my present life because of what I have experienced in my past. It’s not anyone’s fault what I had to put up with from mean classmates in school and senior students in high school and college.”
3. “I feel forgiveness and compassion for those who have wronged me, now that I understand that they must be inflicting upon me what they were feeling inside.”
4. “My desire to conform to the outside world and its expectations has led me down a path of approval-seeking and reputation-building behaviour, which is insecure on one hand and egotistical on the other!”
5. “My desire to meet my self-imposed and external standards drives me to additional strain and effort to deliver and expect certain outcomes, which are increasingly unmanageable and purposeless. While the actual actions and activities themselves certainly represent good professional service, my desire to excel at them stems largely from a standpoint of proving my capabilities to the world. In a weird sort of way, it’s a form of greed to develop a reputation for intellectual prowess and business acumen!”

### DAY 3 – HARD REBOOT

With these deeper and somewhat counter-intuitive and stunningly accurate revelations, I was convinced that meditation was no hypnotic activity. The level of clarity and ability to enter the deeper levels of my consciousness that I was experiencing could only be enabled through a hyper-vigilant (and not a trance-induced!) brain. I was almost in a state of disbelief, not only at the nature of the revelations but especially with the fact that I was arriving at these conclusions on my own. The proverbial onion was being peeled further and further towards its inner core.

Having tried various self-improvements (psychological or dietary) in the past where the beneficial effects wore off soon after the initial shot in the arm impetus for the change, I started to wonder if the same might happen here. After all, we were in an extremely controlled environment at the camp – no external contact, no form of communication with others, minimalistic living, an all day meditation schedule, no distractions or intoxicants, no sexual activity.

Changes experienced in such an ascetic lifestyle can hardly be expected to persist in the real world. Maybe this explained why there were some old (repeat) students who were back to relive the same great experience and remind themselves how good it felt when they experienced it the very first time. I knew that even if my conscious mind recalled how I had felt during the course, my self-doubting and self-loathing unconscious mind would quickly convince me that the entire experience was a bit of a dream state, which wasn't going to last long after the course was over.

I quietly grabbed my breakfast, which were *chilas* (*dosa*-like plain lentil crepes) served with coconut chutney

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as the main course, and sat down to eat. I couldn't think of much else other than how to memorialise my thoughts and feelings so I could motivate and convince myself after the camp was over about the positive benefits from this meditative experience. Little did I know at that time that I wouldn't need memory aids to recall every small detail of what I experienced in those ten days.

I headed to the group meditation after a short yet purposeful brisk morning walk. I got into the meditative position with an eagerness to dive more deeply into the seemingly unending depths of my consciousness. I had noticed that the revelations had turned from the most superficial behavioural ones to deeper implications and recently to the underlying values and motivations that drove me from the inside, and was hoping even deeper meanings would emerge as I focused on observing my breathing and related sensations.

Sure enough, as I concentrated my mind on the focused act of breathing (a process managed by the unconscious mind), I was gifted with more – this time certain tenets by which I now wanted to live my life. Having been in at least slight, if not absolute, violation of these guiding principles for living, for such thoughts to arise from within me was nothing short of a personal breakthrough.

1. “It can be very peaceful and liberating to lead a truthful and truth-filled life, while still being a lot of fun.”
2. “Having lived my life in a certain way, I should now be willing to try this new way and give it a proper chance to take effect and let the benefits reveal themselves to me.”

### DAY 3 – HARD REBOOT

3. “*All* material, physical, and emotional pleasures are transient.”

We all know this and yet we chase after them and choose to indulge ourselves despite being acutely familiar with the after effects. I thought of a hangover after a night of heavy drinking (or at least being dehydrated even after light drinking), the feeling the morning after a one-night stand, receiving a large (or small) year-end bonus and forgetting about how much it mattered a few months down the road.

We also know that for some of these choices, the consequences (physical, mental or emotional) can be destructive, yet find ourselves enslaved by our senses and cannot resist the urge to partake, whether in a momentary lapse of judgment, or as a result of continuous numbing of mental faculties.

4. “It is selfish of me to put down other people, even in jest, as I now know that I have been doing so to feel better about myself. Moreover, to a discerning person, it is my credibility that is diminished when I criticise someone (whether in their presence or behind their back) and shows more about my character (or lack thereof) than anything else.”
5. “I can’t keep living my life impressing others with my skills or conforming to societal or professional expectations, or I will continue feeling unhappy from the inside even if I might achieve many material and career milestones.”

Grateful for uncovering these insights, I retired to

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my room to reflect on the implications of these latest self discoveries.

Later, we returned to the *Dhamma* Hall for individual check-ups on progress in the same small groups. When our group of three students was called up, the first student shared his disappointment at not experiencing any sensations, nor being able to clearly determine which nostril was being employed for the respiratory interchange. The conducting teacher encouraged him to keep trying and be more patient and less self-critical for not making as much progress as he would have liked at this stage. The teacher comforted him by saying that it was natural that something as complex as this technique can take a while to learn, especially when trying it for the first time in life.

I went next and expressed that I was no longer feeling drowsy and was getting basic sensations like itch and perspiration in addition to being able to figure out which nostril was in use at what point in time during the meditation session. The teacher nodded his acknowledgment and moved on to the third student who said he had experienced up to six or seven different sensations in addition to knowledge of nostricular airflow. The teacher encouraged him by saying, "If that's been your experience, I don't have much to add," and asked us to meditate for a few minutes in his presence before calling in the next group.

Walking back to my designated spot in the *Dhamma* Hall, I genuinely felt badly for the first student. I was mentally correlating all my introspective experiences with how far along I must have been in understanding and practicing the technique, and thus estimated that he probably wouldn't



### DAY 3 – HARD REBOOT

have encountered the sort of self discoveries I was stumbling upon during the mediation sessions.

I tried hard to follow *Guruji*'s advice from the previous night's discourse where he insisted that it is futile to compare experiences with other students because the whole point of the exercise is what *we* experience and not what others say they have experienced, seen or heard. Avoiding anxiety driven by peer pressure, which would be heightened by comparing notes with other students, was another reason for the noble silence.

Despite all this cautionary instruction, I couldn't help but feel a tinge of envy that I was only experiencing two of the more straightforward sensations while another student was experiencing up to seven! What could five other sensations be apart from itching and perspiring in the nasal area? I started estimating – all right, maybe feeling hot or cold, maybe dryness, but I still couldn't think of two more. I quickly stopped myself from going down the competitive 'life is a race mindset' and started to focus on meditating rather than pretending to do so.

With my mind working harder and faster to uncover things about myself from the inner portals of my existence, I noticed my thoughts transitioning slowly but discernably from 'diagnosis' to 'recommendations' as I would say to one of my clients in typical consulting fashion. Post-lunch meditation session brought forth some essential behavioural changes *my* unconscious mind wanted me to make, not something my wife, parents, friends, colleagues or clients wanted me to act on.

1. Quit alcohol – no moderation, simply no intake.

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2. Stop consuming meat – not even fish or chicken.
3. Put an end to excessive caffeine consumption.
4. Eat to stay alive and be productive, not to indulge the senses.
5. Drink at least ten glasses of water every day.
6. Find time to be alone with my thoughts every day, or better yet, meditate.
7. Stop poking purposeless and mindless fun at others and indulging in sarcastically critical behaviour. Put a complete end to the use of swear words, not even in jest.
8. Stop bragging about possessions or achievements, no matter how indirectly or subtly.
9. No more multi-tasking.
10. Continue to exercise two to three times a week.

These all seemed like generally sensible things to do. What was significant was that the source of these choices wasn't extrinsic to me – I knew all these changes would actually happen (and stick) naturally for the first time in my life because it felt as if they were being hardwired deep down into my existence.

Thankful, but still unsatisfied with these first order guidelines, I dug deeper in the later afternoon and evening sessions. Then came self commitments that touched on some of the more fundamental underlying values and mindsets with which I had been operating.

1. “I will lead with empathy and kindness, and not by motivating people through creating a sense of accountability and a fear of failure.”

### *DAY 3 – HARD REBOOT*

2. “I will make peace with and apologise to those I have wronged or offended in my life.”
3. “I will forgive all those who have caused me any hurt.” My heart was filling up with empathy for them the more I discovered my own unbecomings.
4. “I will show myself more empathy, stop apologising for being myself and continue to do what I believe is right with an even stronger sense of purpose.”
5. “I will steer clear of actions, words and a value system that is driven from a desire to ‘fit in’ to a world that is extrinsically defined.”

As these bold life plans rapidly precipitated in my mind, I promised myself that a lot was at stake and that I would make every effort to stick to the new lifestyle I was charting for myself. Nothing could be more important and there was no way I was going back to my old way of life. Having self-discovered a better way to life, things could never be the same. Maintaining the status quo was no longer an option.

I remembered feeling the same way when I discovered that chiropractic care was the only workable solution to my chronic back pain after having unsuccessfully tried all sorts of other Western and Eastern medical treatments for over six years. The reason I overcame my once unbearable chronic back pain and brought it to a somewhat manageable level was by persevering with weekly treatments and continuous exercises for a full year after which it was on a stable track.

As these thoughts cycled through my mind, I couldn’t help drawing an analogy between my situation and the

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process through which a badly corrupted computer (that is slow as molasses, hangs every few minutes, has random windows that keep popping up frequently and annoyingly) goes through in order to have all its viruses removed, the hard-drive wiped clean of all its existing content and the operating system reinstalled from the command prompt screen.

What remained now was for the rest of the course was to provide complete protection through the installation of a formidable Symantec anti-virus shield. My system had received a hard reboot and rebuild but was still not completely impermeable to future attacks.

I had thought coming into the camp that I would hopefully at least get some time to think about some of my personal resolutions for the following year as 2010 was drawing to a close. And there I was, rewarded with much more than a list of typically insubstantial and unachievable New Year resolutions. They had come to me spontaneously as a dictum that my inner mind wanted me to follow, and not things I had consciously forced myself to come up with superficially.

*Guruji*'s evening discourse explained the key ingredients and steps for developing a clear understanding of the laws of life. The first component is *rupa* (physical form or matter), which refers to the bodily form of living beings and inanimate objects. Next is *sam(vedna)*, which is the sensation that occurs as *rupa* cognises the outside world either through observation or stimuli, and could either be pleasant or unpleasant.

These *samvednas* are analysed by *sangya* (or intellect), which enables us to process new information by comparing it

### DAY 3 – HARD REBOOT

with previous experiences to draw a value judgment. *Vigyan* is the resultant consciousness we experience through our five senses and the conscious mind; and *sanskar* (or *sankara*) form our inner response or feelings when we experience any sensations and also represent the aggregate conditioning of our unconscious mind. These were explained in the context of *Vipassana*, which enables mastery over the senses.

*Guruji* reminded us that we had seven more days left and that we would be introduced to the art of *Vipassana* the following day. I was excited to hear that was the case but also a bit shell-shocked that all we had been doing so far had been preparation for the real thing. If I had unlocked so much from the inside during the pre-*Vipassana* meditation stage, what more would come out when we started practicing *Vipassana*?!

I could only find out as I waited with sleepless anticipation for the gong to sound the next day, still wonderstruck by the fact that we were now only at the final base camp for the climb to Mount Everest, which was the real peak we were there to scale.



*Day 4*

## Compassionate Recall



I woke up in the morning thinking I was waking up from a dream; the dream being the commitments I had made to myself the previous day. Suddenly, I felt a lot less sure about myself. I thought I must have been on some sort of meditation high – maybe an over oxygenation of my brain due to improved breathing or circulation – to have come up with such implausible goals as completely abstaining from alcohol, the embarrassing prospect of apologising to those I might have offended while dealing with them in difficult situations, or pledging to forgive others who have wronged me in indelibly hurtful ways.

Becoming a teetotaler was tall order for someone like me who took appreciating and enjoying alcohol to a whole new level. I hosted lavish parties, took clients and colleagues out for sumptuous meals where I was the *de facto* wine

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connoisseur who painstakingly and tastefully deliberated vintages with sommeliers, or indulged my closest friends in the finest selection of single malts at home. I was what would safely be considered a keen and somewhat excessive drinker and an admirer of fine spirits. Those who knew me well considered me a benchmark for knowing how to enjoy alcohol and entertain, and also encouraging and enabling others to drink.

I could see many practical barriers in forsaking my favourite poison even if I somehow convinced myself I wanted to do so. What would some of my closest friends think? What would I tell my clients and teams? Would I still have a shot at being the life of the party if I didn't have a drink in my hand? Even more practically, what was I going to do with the extensive and exceptional collection of various wines, liqueurs, scotches, cognacs and the like I had at home?

My thoughts wandered next to the pride-swallowing zone of apologising to folks I had wronged in some material way, whether at work or in my personal life. What would I say to people when years had passed since the incidents that resulted in unforgettable friction? Will they think I have lost my mind coming to them completely out of the blue and apologising to them, years after the misdeed was done and over with? If so, I would certainly feel like a real loser acknowledging my mistakes in a weak emotional moment and later realising I was justified in my previous actions after all. What if these people don't forgive me? What if they said something back in response to my apology that upset me and I said something that worsened the matter?



## DAY 4 – COMPASSIONATE RECALL

I headed to the *Dhamma* Hall for the 4:30 am meditation with all these questions banging against the walls of my fragile yet re-emerging conscience. I found it hard to concentrate exclusively on meditating because I was already feeling a regression from the previous day, which is what I had been afraid of all along. All good things came to an end and so was my euphoria from self-discovering some truths about myself. Sadly, my resolve towards the self-commitments I had made was clearly weakening.

I found myself falling back into the typical cycle of excitement around the prospect of some potential life change to overcome self-destructive habits and then the familiar clouds of doubt setting in, bringing me back to the realities of inertia and resistance to taking action when it came time to make some tough trade-offs and follow the difficult but necessary choices.

But *this* had felt different, I knew it deep down that everything I had resolved to do the previous day had come from a place inside that I never before knew existed nor had I known a way to access it. How could I make this novel and nascent resolve last longer? I started to process all my stated goals in order – the drinking one was on the top of the list so I started there. Why did I want to give it up again?

At this stage in the program, the only reasonable explanation I had was that abstaining from alcohol (and any other form of intoxication), had been one of the many ingredients in enabling my mind to build in-depth awareness around some core mindsets and behaviours that were responsible for my sub-optimised personal and professional

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life. Sustaining such courageous introspection and pursuant benefits would require being able to maintain as many of the preconditions as possible that had led me down the track of powerful self-discoveries which held the potential to revamp my life for the better, and in a way that had made sense to me at a fundamental, logical level.

I searched my mental database for people who I considered successful, who also did not consume alcohol. A range of several profiles emerged. A favourite client CEO, a senior partner at my consulting firm, a family-friend doctor with a large practice, my sister's father-in-law, who was a very senior military officer...suddenly, a light bulb went off in my head!

My sister's father-in-law, who had recently passed away after battling cancer, had been one of the highest ranking officials in the Indian Army when he had retired, and was in line for more accolades had he stayed in duty a little longer. I remembered that though he would keenly entertain others during the extensive social and work-related gatherings at his house, I had never seen him drink. Amazingly, this never detracted from his charmingly charismatic personality. I had tried on many occasions, as was my style, to coax him into having a drink together. He would always decline politely, even on the night when his younger son (who was also my high school roommate) married my sister.

I had never understood why and how a very high ranking Indian army officer managed to do as well as he had done in his career and have a vibrant social life while avoiding alcohol, which flows more freely than water in military circles. While reflecting on this admirable quality

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of sticking to his principles of alcohol abstention, I recalled that he was a regular and serious *Vipassana* meditator!!!

My respect and admiration for him grew even further as I connected the dots that his resolve to abstain from drinking was most likely to maintain the sanctity of his meditative practice. He had always been a role model of leading an equanimous life – I never saw him perturbed over anything and he smilingly battled with cancer while all his loved ones were agitated to see him suffer. He was the only person I had known closely who was truly at peace with himself and the world when he succumbed untimely to his ailment.

Feasting later over a breakfast of *halwa* (sweet semolina pudding) and *parathas* (stuffed Indian bread), I found confidence in the fact that if a *Vipassi* (*Vipassana* meditator) army general could overcome a military stereotype and find a way to give up alcohol without compromising his career, I would certainly be able to figure out a way as well. I was glad I'd had my share of fine Brunellos and McCallan as my resolve to sustain the benefits of meditation strengthened.

After a nice leisurely stroll post-breakfast, I headed up to the *Dhamma* Hall with a throng of students. We received some special instructions before starting the morning's group meditation as we were to be introduced to the *Vipassana* technique later in the day. *Gurujī* instructed us to focus our attention for the purpose of observation only on the small area below the nostrils and above the upper lip.

He explained that we needed to train our minds to be even sharper before progressing to the *Vipassana* technique, and we would enable that by focusing it on a narrower area to observe sensations. Focusing on this new exercise and

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having resolved the conundrum on how to give up alcohol while succeeding professionally in a line of work where drinking was the norm, my mind wandered over to some of the interpersonal changes, where I had set out some bold asks from myself.

As I put my mind to work on the sensations I was observing in the moustache area, it seemed as though my memory started taking me on a roller-coaster of painful moments that involved other people – both personal and work-related – from the last decade or so. It cycled back and forth between situations where I had been unkind to others and those where I had felt that others had been unkind to me.

What was unique about the way this flashback of memories was coming to me was that it seemed as though I was another person in the movie, and not myself, witnessing the drama unfold. Somehow, in a bizarre sort of way, I was able to feel what others must have felt in those situations – both my tormentors and those that I had hurt. The more I experienced (and thus understood) their views and feelings, the only emotion I felt for both sets of people was an increasing sense of empathy and compassion.

With those who had caused me pain, I saw that what they were dealing with on the inside (whether fear, anger, jealousy, greed) must have driven them to treat me the way they did. It seemed fairly logical and understandable to me why they did what they did, given they were under the influence of (if not completely enslaved to) tendencies and emotions which can only cause harm. I felt badly for what they must have been going through and the source

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of pain and suffering, or insecurity that drove them to feel those negative emotions. I was simply the substrate on which their feelings expressed themselves in the form of hurtful actions.

I felt a much greater sense of sympathy for those who had suffered at my hands when my negative emotions had found expression with them at the receiving end; I felt most overcome with compassionate affection for my junior colleagues with whom I had been tough in difficult moments. While most who worked with me frequently were acquainted with my tough-love mentorship style, a handful who came into contact with me for brief periods of time had also received some tough feedback when they erred a few too many times on my watch. I still felt that I had delivered all the right messages on almost all such occasions, but I now had issues with the way in which I had done so.

In consulting speak, it wasn't so much the 'what' but the 'how' that no longer added up for me. My diagnoses of the situations had been accurate, as were the changes I had recommended these individuals make, but I had been unkind in the way I had conducted myself in driving home my assessment of the situations.

Minute details from conversations and strands of emails started coming back to me as if these events from several years past had happened only a few days ago! Experiencing a complete recall of the specifics helped me cement the case for making peace with both sets of people. In particular, I started to make a mental list of all the people I wanted to meet (or call) and tell them I was sorry for having hurt their feelings and it had been unbecoming of me to have done so.

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As I started to think about some of the junior colleagues on the work side of my *apologies list*, I asked myself what else I might do besides apologising to certain individuals. I wanted to give back to this community of consultants who probably continue to suffer more often than is acknowledged by their seniors over their years of work. I came upon the idea that over the course of my time at my firm, I had discovered its several facets and learned lessons that might benefit younger tenured colleagues trying to find their own way.

What could I do to impart these potentially helpful ideas to the broader range of younger consultants who were on their own journeys to do the same? Perhaps write an internal blog about what I thought it took to be successful at the firm? Somehow that didn't seem enough of a reach; it would require people to find out about it and want to read it. Maybe I could write a book (an internal one for privacy and confidentiality reasons) to share all the stories and anecdotes with which I often amused colleagues during long team dinners, and disseminate it to colleagues around the firm. This certainly seemed more far-reaching in its appeal. Perhaps I had found a way to give back to a community of colleagues, which had served in a huge way to contribute towards my success!

I had always wanted to write a book (a novel, non-fiction, anything) but never had the foggiest idea how to go about it. Also, I hadn't imagined the first book I would write would be an internal company 'everything you wanted to know but were too afraid to ask' sort of guidebook. That said, the drive I felt to serve generations of younger consultants was overwhelming. I checked myself; what would others think?

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After all, I wasn't the Managing Director of the firm sharing pearls of wisdom from two or three decade long experience at the firm, nor was I retiring. So it wasn't a particularly poignant nostalgic opportunity to be penning my career memoirs.

All such misgivings notwithstanding, my feeling of compassionate giving was overwhelmingly strong and I decided to persist with the idea. Not knowing any better, I applied my consulting approach and started with developing a 'storyline'. Topics started flowing from my mind and soon I had over 20 different ones and as many personal anecdotes and stories that could become small chapters or vignettes in the book.

Subsequent meditation sessions served to add more fodder to the ideas and soon I had all the chapters planned logically in terms of applicability to consultants of different tenures and roles, which aligned nicely with my own time trajectory at the firm. All that was left to be done now was to write the stories (which were imprinted on my mind) onto a manuscript.

Getting a manuscript ready required four things, I thought – an idea, inspiration, creative expression, and will power. A lot of people with great ideas struggle to find the inspiration to write. Ideas and inspiration are insufficient without the gift or ability to express thoughts in words that will resonate with others. As with any other major undertaking, sheer will power and perseverance is necessary to get the task over the goal line as there are many stumbling blocks and potential barriers to completion.

I thought that the idea I had was a decent one, as I knew

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I would have wanted to read and would have benefitted from such an account of informal tips and tricks when I started out as a brand new associate consultant. More encouraging evidence came through recalling the look of amusement and eureka on consultants' faces when I narrated my firm-related stories on countless occasions. I chose to believe they had been honest in their appreciation of the learnings or humour they drew from those stories and were not simply feigning interest. I had also found my source of inspiration through the remorseful compassion I had felt for some of younger colleagues during the introspective meditative processes.

Even with the idea and inspiration in full supply, the next challenge was how to express my thoughts and stories well in writing. The only form of prose I had written since college (where I took one humanities class on creative writing out of 50 or more courses in engineering) was a highly technical doctoral thesis, papers and journal articles in my research on genetic sequencing, project reports, executive summaries and proposal letters for clients, or knowledge documents, white papers and articles in my field of expertise within management consulting.

I remembered enjoying the creative writing course and had written a few pieces of prose and poetry that had caught my professor's attention at the time. Will power wasn't what I was concerned about at this stage. I still had to revive and assess my creative expression first, which I recollected from college days as being amateurish at its best if I were to be a fair judge.

Spending most of the time during the designated breaks in the meditation schedule in conceptualising the



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internal book, I forced myself to focus the rest of my day on carefully understanding the *Vipassana* technique, which was to be unveiled shortly in a special continuous two-hour instruction session.

The special session started with *Gurujī* explaining that *Vipassana* essentially means to observe things objectively as they really are and comprehensively from various angles as opposed to simply from one single subjective vantage point. In order to facilitate such an experience, we were to apply the process of focusing the mind's attention from one spot (i.e., the moustache area) and apply that same technique to every inch of our body.

The *Vipassana* technique emphasised the virtue of objectively observing the sensations experienced on our body. It was quite impressive that the entire process hinged on self-observation; in a manner of saying, what we experience on our own self is *all* we really need to believe to be actually true.

It was a process of learning to accept reality as we observed it – no tricks, no gimmicks. I had always appreciated that often the knottiest of problems are unlocked with a simple and elegant solution, whether in engineering, business or life, and this technique grew on me more and more because of its simplicity. *Gurujī* explained that our inner (unconscious) mind only considers *true* those occurrences that we witness on our own physical body. It made perfect sense at a fundamental and logical level. After all, any other form of observation would be indirect at best.

The process itself, to learn and employ the technique, was to start at the top of the head and work our way through

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every organ and body part through to the tips of the toes, all the while objectively and equanimously witnessing sensations on the portion of the body being ‘scanned’. We were instructed to maintain an ‘observer’ mindset and constantly remind the mind that any pleasant or unpleasant sensation we experience is transient, and thus there is no value in either craving it (if pleasant) or avoiding it (if unpleasant).

*Guruji* walked us through a potential sequence to traverse each part of the body without missing anything. Initially, I found it very hard to feel anything, particularly in the large muscles of the upper and lower limbs, and wasn’t quite sure if I was getting the hang of this new technique. It had taken us three and a half days to train the mind to focus its energy on one small part of our body and the rest of the course would essentially be dedicated to mastery of the *Vipassana* technique.

I now appreciated why we (especially the new meditation students) hadn’t been started out directly with this technique. There simply would have been no basis to grasp its complexities without some foundation of observing our breathing and simpler body sensations and in having developed a somewhat sharpened and concentrated mind. I was excited that this new technique seemed really challenging so it would be fun to learn and practice it in the remaining time. I didn’t know then that the learning curve treadmill was to get steeper and faster every subsequent day.

We were started out with a few warm-up rounds of going from the top to the bottom of the body after which we were called up for individual check-ups to ensure we had clearly understood the detailed instructions. It turned out

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that my observation scanning cycles were too quick (two to three minutes) when at this stage we were expected to take nearly ten minutes. I had a sense I was rushing through a bit because I would advance forward when I wouldn't get a sensation somewhere. The conducting teacher confirmed I needed to slow down and go through each body part systematically, whether I experienced a sensation there or not.

The evening discourse was pivotal, both in clarifying the mechanics of the *Vipassana* technique, and also explaining its basis to serve as a vehicle for developing equanimity. Through a meditative technique to witness sensations in an objective observational manner and treating all sensations neutrally by neither craving nor avoiding them, we were training the unconscious mind to remain equanimous whether the body experienced a sensation that it liked or disliked by reminding it that both are impermanent and transient. By actually following these micro-experiments on our own body, we validate the theory that these physiological events or episodes (e.g., itch, pain, palpitation, pulsation, perspiration) are all sensations that first arise and then ebb away.

Our conscious mind might know this at superficial and intellectual levels but the unconscious mind acts impulsively based on its prior conditioning or its inherent tendencies – i.e., crave a pleasant sensation and want it to last longer or avoid an unpleasant sensation and try to make it disappear. Such conditioning of the unconscious mind promotes 'animalistic tendencies' and leads to not having control over the senses. The moment our mind craves something, our

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bodily actions follow to fulfill that craving.

As one of my old friends from college had summed it up nicely as his email signature once, “The best way to avoid temptation is to give in to it!” While cheaply humorous, there was some truth to that seemingly counter-intuitive statement. At least for certain pleasures (whether caffeine or sex) we often give in easily to what our body wants versus what it needs. The converse is true for things or people we dislike – we spend our time and energy avoiding situations or individuals that we find displeasing for one reason or another, often investing a lot of mental energy and space in schemes to accomplish this avoidance.

Example after example, instance after instance, *Gurujī* expounded that it’s a universal law of nature that all beings, events and episodes are transitory by their very inherent design. All our life, we keep working against this natural law to hold on to the things that we cherish and run away from the things that we dislike. Both are impermanent and our conscious mind might even understand this virtue of transience (if conditioned to do so), but the unconscious mind continues to lead us with its inherently mischievous and restless ways, which are further fuelled by our self-created and magnified sense of ego.

In general, of the three types of actions we undertake – physical, vocal, and mental – we would realise that mental actions are the originators and are most important, once we build an acute awareness of ourselves. They are the seeds from which our words and deeds grow into the leaves and fruit of the proverbial tree. Plant a cactus, and there won’t be apples to pick from its tree down the road, and so it is

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with our thoughts. All this sounded like common knowledge and was fairly well documented in religious scriptures around the world or in books about philosophy.

As soon as the question, “So what’s new about this?” popped into my head, *Gurujī* explained that the only way this conscious (bookish) knowledge gets imprinted on our unconscious mind (which is what makes us act in involuntary reflexive ways), is if the mind actually experiences these laws of the universe on its own physical body form. This made sense. How else could we be absolutely certain of whether these laws apply to us, even if they are well known to others? Seeing is believing...



Day 5

## Surprising Resolve



I was eager to start practicing the new *Vipassana* meditation technique; it was the sort of thing that sounded easier than it really was once you got down to trying it out yourself. I came up with my own slightly different sequence to scan through the entire body than the one *Guruji* had suggested. He had explained it was fine to have our own system so long as it ensured that we hadn't missed any part of the body.

I would start at the crown of the head, moving down to the forehead, ears, eyes, nose, cheeks, upper jaw, lower jaw, neck and throat, shoulders, armpits, upper arms, elbows, forearms, wrists, 'heels' of the hands, palms, upper skin of the hands, fingers, chest, thoracic region, abdomen, groin, upper back, mid-back, lower back, hips, thighs, knees, calf muscles, shins, heels, soles of the feet, upper skin of the feet,

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and toes. The main difference was that I scanned the neck and throat after finishing the head and face while *Guruji's* method was to do the upper limbs first and then do the neck and throat together with the torso.

I found it easier to complete the neck and throat before starting with the main body. I had to make some adjustments when *Guruji's* step by step (body part by part) instructions would stream through the cassette player in the slightly different sequence. I also tried to slow down the process of going through each organ since my overall cycle time had been a good three times faster than what was expected at this stage in the learning process. I might have overcorrected slightly because I did five cycles in the hour long sitting before dawn.

Back in my room, I recalled my plan from the previous day to write a book for my junior colleagues and encountered another wave of self-doubt – had I been drinking too much of my own Kool-Aid? Who was going to read my book? Was it too conceited of me to think that my views on what it takes to succeed in my company would matter to others?

Would other partners at my firm think I was slacking off from my client service responsibilities and investing too much energy on internal initiatives? Would people understand where I was coming from in wanting to give back to junior colleagues at the same firm where I had received some very caring mentorship and hand-holding coaching from my seniors during tough times?

I was still looking for an angle to rationalise my goal to write a learning-oriented set of personal vignettes and eventually found one! Aside from my client responsibilities, I



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was also the partner in charge of learning and development for the regional office of which I was a part! It was a perfectly sound rationale for me to invest effort in writing this learning-oriented internal book for younger tenured consultants, a logical and professionally acceptable basis for penning these perspectives.

Pleased with my renewed resolve to share learnings from my career journey for the benefit of others, I enjoyed a brisk walk outside after a nice wholesome breakfast of *sabudana khichidi* (tapioca pudding).

During the post-breakfast group meditation, I surprisingly found my mind distilling some powerful messages about my life thus far and how I might consider shifting my mindset and approach as I moved forward.

1. “My mind and body have been badly polluted.”
2. “Thrill and excitement are short-lived pleasures. Happiness, however, is a continuous internal state of mind that is not contingent on or driven by external events.”
3. “Too much focus on and pursuit of prestige is self-destructive, often elusive and leads to unhappiness.”
4. “Material objects and worldly success cannot awaken the self within.”
5. “My approach towards life (underlying frame of mind) doesn’t engender trust and warmth though it might draw awe and respect from others.”
6. “My own life’s guiding principles are ironically incongruent with the sort of advice I give my clients.”

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The clarity with which these thoughts were coming to my mind was even more startling than the observations and self-commitments I had unearthed a few days ago. I hadn't misestimated that *Vipassana* would help me delve deeper, far beyond where I had come through *Aana Pana* breathing observation in the first four days. The late morning session crystallised more of these observations and some future guidelines.

1. "Remember that today is the first day of the rest of my life so use it well." I had read something to the same effect in a book of quotations some time back but had never realised its value before. Now, when I had seen how toxic I had made my life in the past, I had found a new appreciation for the present day.
2. "Lead through acts of kindness."
3. "Dishonesty in dealings (however small and even if undiscovered) breeds greed and discontentment."
4. "Be peaceful, embrace and promote harmony."
5. "Have a pleasant effect on others, not try to be of shock value."
6. "The only person whose behaviour I can actually control is myself – I shouldn't be upset when others don't follow my instructions and accept it peacefully."

Walking back to my room, I realised that a large part of these revelations had been driven through technicolour visualisation and recollection of events far in the past that I

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was now viewing objectively. I was experiencing my memory getting hyper-activated, and my brain functioning and information processing speed continuing to accelerate.

I recalled reading in some cognitive science literature that we typically used less than 10% of our brain power and I had often wondered what goes on in the other 90% and how to harness it. The experience I was having gave me a powerful and self-realised glimpse of what it must be like to get more mileage from our little grey cells.

I had a quick lunch and went up to the *Dhamma* Hall as I wanted to ask the conducting teacher during the allotted Q&A time at 12 noon whether what I was experiencing was expected (and normal) or whether I was imagining these things. I had to wait a while to meet the teacher as someone else was seeking some clarification when I arrived. I started tapping my right hand fingers on the knuckles of my left hand to pass the time, and realised I was drumming a coherent tune, and that too at a fairly fast speed – I started wondering if my hand-mind coordination might also have enhanced and might enable the skill to play a percussion instrument, something I had always wished to do as a child!

Heady with all these improved physical and mental faculties, I sat down to describe my recent observations to the conducting teacher. I started with the benign one about excessive salivation that I had felt during the *Vipassana* sittings and went on to tell him about my faster reflexes and hand-mind coordination, improved memory function and reignited creative expression.

I could also have sworn that my finger nails were growing slower than usual – I had clipped them nearly two

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weeks ago before leaving Singapore and they had hardly eked out a few millimetres – but decided not to share that finding as the teacher might consider me delusional for imagining decelerating normal biological processes!

He acknowledged that over-salivation was one of the known physiological effects – I figured that perhaps explained the better digestion I had been experiencing because chemically speaking, saliva is essentially a digestive. As I shared the changes I was experiencing in my brain functioning with the conducting teacher, he simply smiled in response and said, “This is just the beginning”.

Then he waved to let the next student come in with his query. I had also wanted to ask him about my faster breathing that would start spontaneously at certain times during the meditation but figured that would have to wait until another time. “This is just the beginning”?! What more could possibly happen? I was already feeling hyper-productive and compassionately creative – and this was just the beginning?

My admiration for the technique of *Vipassana* grew monumentally as the hours of meditation progressed by the day. I also started to feel a sense of gratitude towards my wife who had been insistent that I undergo this meditative curriculum because she knew I would draw some benefit from it. I was aware that we were now roughly halfway through the program, and I wanted to redouble my efforts for the remaining time to draw maximum benefit from my overall experience at the camp. I had let the first day be consumed by my initial skepticism so I had to cover some lost ground.

## DAY 5 – SURPRISING RESOLVE

I sat down for the post-lunch group meditation session and tuned into the special instructions *Guruji* was imparting. He instructed us that starting from that very sitting, we were to take the oath of *adhithana* (the sitting of strong determination) and sit straight through and meditate for a complete hour without adjusting our posture even once. Had I heard it right – not move our legs, arms, nor open our eyes for one straight hour?!!! And why were we to start from that sitting itself? It would have helped to have some notice to brace ourselves a bit more, for what seemed nearly impossible.

I had been impressed with *Guruji*'s methods thus far (explaining theory after self-observed experimentation, progressive learning, preparing the mind for complex tasks through acceleration of mental faculties, the totally immersive nature of the program, among various other subtle aspects like the single direction (clock-wise) garden walks to avoid eye contact with other students) so trusted that there must be some deep rationale for surprising us with having to make a determination to achieve a fairly aggressive and seemingly impossible goal. If I had known something like this would be expected of us by the fifth day, I would have built up my resolve by achieving a smaller goal like sitting in the same position for at least half an hour in previous days.

Thus far, I had been averaging some major bodily movement (adjusting the hands or legs and opening my eyes to check the time) three to four times per hourly sitting. If I was to not do any of these things, and that too all of a sudden, for a full hour, I was pretty sure my back and right

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knee (which had suffered sports injuries and needed chronic maintenance and pain management) would give way for sure. And I had decided earlier in the program not to ask for back support either against a wall or in a chair. I figured what had to be done had to be done and closed my eyelids as the instructions in English ended.

The first 15 minutes, or so I estimated because there was no way to check the time with my eyes closed, were a breeze. That's when the knee I was concerned about started throbbing with pain. I reminded myself that even pain was impermanent (or so I hoped) and persisted for another five minutes. While sitting cross-legged can be a fairly comfortable seating posture for those who like it, to stay frozen in that exact same position for an hour can be extremely trying.

Not that I had tried it, but I was pretty sure that sitting still (and just observing breathing or bodily sensations) in *any* position, let alone in a cross-legged *mudra* (posture) for an hour was virtually impossible for most people without significant practice, certainly for someone like me who was not used to sitting idle even for a few minutes at a time.

I found it very difficult to actually focus on meditating in this session because my mind was fixated on the excruciating pain I was experiencing in my right knee, and increasingly through the entire base of my lower back. My lower right leg started feeling numb as it was bearing the full weight of the left one because of the way I had crossed my legs. I would have given anything to get up and stretch my legs even as I estimated it must have been less than 30 minutes since the session began. Out of sheer peer pressure, I knew I

## DAY 5 – SURPRISING RESOLVE

wasn't going to be the first one to throw in the towel during our first sitting of strong determination.

I tried to move my mind away from the fact that *Guruji* had also instructed us that we were to be in *adhitthana* during each of the three group meditation sessions every day for the rest of the course. Encouragingly, he had indicated that we would arrive at a stage in our *sadhna* (meditation practice) when we would be able to sit comfortably for an hour at a time, several times in a day, and even with the same leg as the weight-bearing one. With the deepest respect for *Guruji*, I thought that at least in my case that stage simply wouldn't be possible without some divine intervention.

I knew from experience that almost any new skill (a sport, a foreign language etc.) could be mastered through continuous practice. I had even learned basic juggling at a company training program once within a week, which we were taught to drive home the same point. But surely one couldn't reverse feeling intense chronic pain simply through practice. Finally, I thought I had found an inconsistency, a flaw, in the logic behind *Vipassana* meditation that had thus far seemed fairly sound, and counted down the minutes and seconds for the hour to be over. We would know that relief was imminent when the *anicca* chant would commence at the 55-minute mark.

Running out of energy to keep thinking about where and how much pain I was experiencing, I considered the idea of actually trying to meditate for the rest of the time. This turned out to be a decent thought because once completely numbed with the painful sensations in the back and right knee, my mind found it refreshing to explore other parts of

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the body that were witnessing various other forms of activity like palpitation, itching, excessive heat, stretching and some other hard to characterise sensations.

I felt a twitch on my right hand and surmised that one of the mosquitoes, which had otherwise left me alone thus far in the session, had rightfully emboldened to take a shot at me while I was playing the hour-long game of statue. Luckily for the mosquito, not only could I not move while in *adhitthana*, I wouldn't have hurt it anyway because of the oath of kindness towards all living things that we had taken at the very beginning of the course. I tried to pry loose my right pinky and make it go away but not before it had done its work and pricked me for a few nanolitres of blood. I now had another sensation, a mosquito bite, to contend with!

The last ten minutes or so probably felt like another hour and I started wondering if the conducting teacher had forgotten that the hour had already been over while we continued to be tortured in our meditation spots. Finally, the recognisable sound of the play button in the 1980s-era cassette player being pressed down to start the *anicca* chant heralded that relief was only minutes away. Getting up from the hour-long sitting felt nothing short of prison-break for an innocent, wrongly convicted inmate.

It was a big milestone to have come through the other end of a full one-hour continuous sitting without any forewarning or adequate preparation. I hadn't realised that despite years and years of restless activity, I still had enough patience and tolerance for pain and discomfort, and the absolute mental will and discipline to not stir even once in a full hour.



## DAY 5 – SURPRISING RESOLVE

I now appreciated *Gurujī*'s methods even more. Achieving this seemingly impossible goal through a surprising resolve had turned out to be a huge boost for my self confidence, especially because my preparation wasn't complete, or so I had thought. I also realised why sitting in one position was important – the slightest move (e.g., when I tried to flick away the mosquito with my little finger) made the *samadhi* (meditating posture) less sacrosanct, as I had noticed that my meditative concentration had diminished slightly as a result.

Feeling more sure of myself, I sat through the evening *adhitthana* with slightly less discomfort, and eagerly awaited the evening discourse to get some explanation for the day's experiences. *Gurujī* expounded on the causes of *dukha* (misery) which arises from attachment to one (or more) of four sources.

1. Our desires (whether craving likes or avoiding dislikes)
2. Me and mine thinking (or egoistic tendencies)
3. Our perspectives, viewpoints, and beliefs
4. Our traditions, rituals, religious rites and processes

We live our lives in suffering because we choose to react when we don't get our way (or when things don't go our way) against one or more of these four sources. We encounter something unfavourable and we create the *sankara* (negative emotion) that results in making us miserable down the road. The only way (or place) to break the cycle of unhappiness is at its very genesis where the emotions of either craving

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or displeasure arise and express themselves in the form of sensations on our body, by remaining equanimous, both when either a pleasant or unpleasant sensation occurs.

My own alternate explanation in support of this logic was that through *Vipassana*, one starts retraining the unconscious mind to not create any negative emotions (leave alone consider taking any physical action), when it encounters any stimuli that cause sensations on the bodily form of which it is the central command tower. By remaining equanimous in either situation, the mind starts learning that it is pointless to react in either a favourable or unfavourable way because it knows first hand that whatever the body might be experiencing, is definitely impermanent and transient.

The training is only completed when over the course of days, months and years, the mind experiences the universal law of impermanence enacted on the stage of its own body, over and over and over again. The logical flaw in the technique's theory, that I had seemingly uncovered when experiencing pain during the first *adhitthana*, wasn't real after all. The subsequent sitting of strong determination was more bearable, proving that even excruciating sensations of pain were impermanent.

Day 6

## Midlife Catapult



I had started wearing my watch to the meditation sessions as I felt that the distraction risk was much lower now that I was meditating continuously for an hour with my eyes closed. I have generally had a good sense for time but not down to short increments, which was essential when every additional minute of pain endurance was precious. The number of people coming to the *Dhamma* Hall for the 4:30 am sitting had been dwindling as the days had progressed, perhaps because people were practicing in their rooms, or saving their energies for the three mandatory one-hour continuous meditation sittings.

I knew that the old students also had provisions to practice alternatively in the *shunyagars* (individual meditation cells) in a separate area. I had wondered whether new students would be given a taste of the meditation cells or

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we might have to come back for a second course to have the solitary meditative opportunity. I happily settled for my comfortable spot in the *Dhamma* Hall in the meantime and closed my eyes at 4:32 am.

I had two goals for the session – to persist despite the pain in my right leg and lower back, and not to open my eyes until the full hour was over. It's not easy to clock an exact hour with one's eyes closed. I figured that I had a good sense for half an hour so all I would have to do is to count that out twice that amount of time and would be in good shape.

During the meditation itself, my thoughts went to the realisation of how lucky I was to have stumbled upon this great technique early enough in my lifetime to draw benefit from it in the years to come. So many stars had aligned – my wife's insistence that I attend this course for several years, her year-end vacation being shorter than mine, the special appeal of the executive version of the course and the timing and location for the course fitting my India trip itinerary like a hand in a glove.

In hindsight, I was now glad that the timing was delayed from my original plan to attend the course in the summer because I'd had more life experiences in the intervening time that made for even more fertile ground on which to work.

In all of this, the biggest motivating factor had been my wife. She would frequently look up potential course schedules and kept strategically synergising them with other interesting travel plans I could make in conjunction with sitting in a *Vipassana* camp. It was also she who had found that

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an executive version of the course was offered in Mumbai, which had lowered the activation energy threshold for me to agree to register.

Of all the other favourable coincidences that enabled my participation, she had played the most proactive and vital part. She was the persevering influencer who had drawn the proverbial ‘horse to the water’. I had done well thus far in gulping down the benefits of the program in bucketfuls to quench my thirst for a better way to lead life.

My consciousness was suddenly overflowing with a surge of gratitude towards my wife as I knew that an intrinsically skeptical and quantitatively analytical soul like me wouldn’t have come across something like *Vipassana* on my own. Even if I had, I wouldn’t have given it a chance and would have rationally dismissed it without considering the possibility of its potential merit.

I recalled that my wife would often ask me why I hadn’t written any poetry since college and my mind spontaneously started working out the rhyming words for a few couplets about her and our relationship, which started streaming into my conscious mind. I found it easy to come up with rhyming phrase after the next that captured the essence of our life together over the dozen years we had known each other. I wondered if this was happening mysteriously given how grateful I felt towards my wife or because my mind was unleashing poetic expression, something that I had convinced myself had been a fluke blip during the romantic college years.

I was experiencing the opposite of writer’s block, if there was such a thing, with a flow of words ranging from

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10<sup>th</sup> grade Shakespeare to the fanciful (yet unusable) words I must have studied to prepare for the GRE test before applying to graduate school in the States. What was even more remarkable was that these words were surfacing in my mind conjoined with interestingly humorous similes, metaphors, or juxtaposed together in clever phrases and witty expressions.

While this might not be how Rushdie or Kafka would have felt about the quality of my spontaneous creative expression, what I was experiencing was well beyond the impossible for the person that I had known myself to be for nearly 35 years! Carried away with all the poetic rhyming, I overshot the hour-long sitting by ten minutes. I came back to my room and strung together an entire poem (with seven couplets) for my wife before the breakfast gong was sounded.

I was shaking with excitement when I walked into the dining hall. I stacked up four *idlis* (rice cakes) on my platter and poured three ladlefuls of *sambar* (lentil curry) over them, grabbed some coconut chutney and ketchup, and sat down quietly in a corner to eat. For the first time in almost a week, I wanted to talk to someone and share what was happening with me from the inside, as I was finding it hard to contain my enthusiasm.

I went outside for a walk and the cool morning breeze swept a sense of calm over me. I felt happy and fortunate for my life and grateful to have finally heard the soft knock of the opportunity to liberate myself from the painful trappings of my old life. Finally, with complete confidence, I knew that the days of self-doubt and self-loathing were over

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because I had understood from first principles that I, and only I, was the master of my own happiness. No external event or person had the potential to perturb that equation so long as I maintained the equanimous perspective that a self-observing, introspective meditative practice had brought about in me.

*Gurujī*'s teaching that *mukti* (complete liberation) was not Siddhartha Gautama's (the Buddha's) monopoly started to make sense for the first time. Anyone, absolutely anyone from the high-flying CEO to the head of a state to the poor blue collar worker to the convicted criminal had the right to, and could learn to set their mind free of all misery, should they *choose* to do so. The entire world needed to know about the value and power of this technique and I wanted to tell anyone and everyone I could about the benefit I had experienced from the meditation camp.

How was I to do so? I would go door to door to deliver the message to whomever might give me an audience if I had to, in order to help others benefit from the technique that had awakened me to the fundamental and universal principles of life and existence. Recognising how off-center I had been before the camp and yet having managed to draw some value from the experience, surely others who understood the principles better than I would embrace the benefits more easily.

It quickly dawned on me that the best and most realistic way for me to share my 'before' and 'after' story was by writing a book or a blog and build further awareness around this rediscovered technique to encourage people to take the first step and attend the free ten-day introductory *Vipassana*

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meditation camp. It takes a lot of personal sacrifice to spare ten days, but I hoped that my life-changing experience might compel others to consider giving it a try.

I felt that even if one more person drew benefit from learning to practice *Vipassana*, my effort in writing a book about my experience would be well worth it. Yet, I had no idea how I was going to go about writing a book but knew that if I had a purposeful resolve, the path would emerge on its own. After all, I had already developed a storyline for an internal consulting book and reconnected with the poet within. Surely I could share my experiences from the meditation camp!

I didn't know the first thing about publishing a mass-market (or any!) book but felt that if I put my newfound creative energy to it, nothing would be impossible. I remembered something a senior colleague had said in a speech during my orientation for newly elected partners, "If your dreams don't scare you, they are not big enough!" I also remembered thinking at the time the biggest dream I had was to become a hugely successful entrepreneur after my consulting career and then semi-retire as a professor at an Ivy League school in my sunset years.

Both dreams were lofty ones but I had always considered them well within reach with my current skills and drive, thus never felt scared of these aspirations. Dreams of conveying a powerful message about a life-changing experience to all of humanity did seem a bit daunting, though something inside kept telling me it was the right thing to do.

It wasn't an option for me to muffle the vibrant flame of compassion these few days had ignited inside me. It was as if



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I needed to do this because the purpose of communicating the value of this technique, which had the prospect to set so many suffering souls free of misery through their own effort and self-discovery, was so much bigger than me.

I felt driven by a self-propelling force from within which was discovering the means to disseminate this powerful message and my resolve to share the benefits I had experienced was growing stronger and stronger. For the first time, my dream did scare me a bit, but only because it wasn't something I had considered before in my wildest imagination and not because I thought it wouldn't materialise because it couldn't be done.

Thinking about the positive changes I had experienced and the general value of introspective self-observation and self-discovery, I slowly started intuiting that a lot of the world's greats must have known about the power and benefits of such thinking. They clearly had managed to imprint the knowledge of these universal principles onto their unconscious minds, whether through similar meditation techniques or some other processes.

I recalled the phrase from Viktor Frankl's (an unexpected and rare survivor from the Nazi concentration camps) book 'Man's Search for Meaning' that had stuck with me, "Between the stimulus and response, lies the freedom of choice". Clearly, he had known that he would only feel tormented by his captors if his mind *chose* to accept the pain they were inflicting on him.

Instead, despite any form of torture (however demeaning or physically brutal), his mind could tell itself that whatever his body or ego was experiencing was impermanent and it

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would eventually ebb away (as does everything else) and thus the mind could *choose* not to respond to any stimulus with a feeling of dejection or despair at its pitiable circumstances in the concentration camps.

Frankl writes that what kept him alive when others around him (including close family members) were succumbing to their situation was that he never gave up hope that he would make it out alive. The only way I could imagine he kept his hope genuinely alive and not faking it with wishful thinking was through knowing at a deep and fundamental level that unless with some brutality his tormentors took his life, whatever emotional and physical agony they were inflicting on him would only hurt him deep down into his consciousness if his mind gave permission to *accept* the pain being caused as a negative sensation, and by wanting it to go away.

So long as his spirit was alive and hopeful, his mind equanimous, any non-fatal harm to his physical body wouldn't matter. Viktor was pulled out of the camps a mere skeleton with a veneer of skin on his body. People who saw him at the time said it was virtually impossible to have survived under the conditions in which he was tortured. It finally made sense to me what Frankl meant when he said, "...lies the *freedom* of choice".

Having connected the dots on how Viktor Frankl emerged alive from the concentration camps, beating the odds and how he chose to neutralise the torments from the Nazis, I noticed that the pain I had been experiencing in previous sittings in my lower back and right knee was virtually gone. I tuned in again to those same parts of my

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body to observe and consider what I was feeling there and all I felt were the steady uneventful surface conditions on the skin.

I knew at this time in the sitting, from my crude time-estimation techniques, that we were at least over 30 minutes into the session. Usually my right knee would have started throbbing at the 16<sup>th</sup> minute and continue the entire hour and the lower back pain would follow soon after, as if in sympathy, and move from the bottom upwards as the sitting progressed to engulf me with a blanket of pain all over my back until the sound of the *anicca* chant would ease the strain throughout my body.

Something seemed off. Maybe while reflecting on Frank's survival in the Nazi camps, I had stopped thinking about my knee and back pain – wait, *I stopped thinking* about the pain and it went away?! *My* chronic lower back pain disappeared because I wasn't actively focusing my mind's energy towards it?

My scientific training kicked in and I started analysing how it might be possible that the *physical* pain I was experiencing had evaporated because my *mental* faculties had chosen to ignore it. I tried to piece together how we experience pain from fragments of junior-high school biology that I could remember.

If a body part's (or more precisely a biological cell's) physical boundary is violated in any way (through a pin-prick or pressure or shear or another kind of force), its corresponding nerve sends off a signal to the brain. Once the brain receives the specific signal (about the type of force) and assesses the extent of the infraction (e.g., how deep is the

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cut), it decides that it's time to experience the appropriate amount of pain and sends that message back to the injured or affected part of the body.

Eureka! It's the brain that regulates the experience and extent of pain – naturally this is done unconsciously by our mind or none of us in our right minds (unintended pun) would ever choose to experience an iota of pain, which is a neurobiological system designed to alert us to danger to our physical body. It's our unconscious mind that needs the rewiring to learn that all sensations (including pain) are transient so as not to avoid or bemoan them. Because the mind *accepts* the sensation of pain as something it doesn't want, the pain persists and continues to bother us.

It would naturally be wrong to conclude that we should leave an open wound bleeding because every sensation is impermanent. While the pain is still transient, its role as a messenger of life-threatening and other serious ailments calls us to attend to the underlying source of unhealth in order to restore the body's wellbeing. How we orient our unconscious mind (once we can train and control it) will decide whether the mind treats the pain as transient or seemingly permanent. And depending on the orientation of the mind, the pain will last longer (seemingly indefinitely) or ebb away faster.

All this might not add up for the medically inclined, yet it was certainly what I substantiated through my experiments with the chronic pain in my back and knee, which I had suffered for nearly ten years since I had been injured during a fateful game of squash.

Having concluded the pain experiment, I distinctly

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recalled one of my aunts telling me when I was gripped with pain immediately following my sports injury that I was thinking too much about my pain and she thought I would feel better if I stopped thinking about it. I had chuckled at that time at her lack of physiological understanding of the human body and had been slightly put off by her nonchalant suggestion that I could simply let go of feeling my pain.

Years later now, I finally nodded acknowledgement to the wisdom of what she had said very matter-of-factly at the time. She might not have known the neurobiological process for how the mind initiates and regulates the sensation of pain, but probably had known from her personal experience that one can make pain go away by not thinking about it. One by one, many of life's mysteries were revealing their secrets to me and my admiration for those who had known them all along continued to grow.

The mystery of how a man, any man, can ask someone who slaps him on one cheek, to go ahead and hit him again on the other one, also began to unlock itself. I had always appreciated Mahatma Gandhi's non-violence movement but had wondered how he could accept a personal insult or injury and stay calm and not flinch. I understood now that the only way he could maintain an equanimous stance in the face of emotional or physical assault was if his mind *chose* not to let the ego feel hurt or let the body lament the physical pain the striker had caused through the act of aggression.

Gandhi had also understood and known what Frankl had concluded and had exercised the *freedom of his response* to remain equanimous as he faced his aggressors. Gandhi's

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equanimous response diffused their power to torment him, and was how he brought the mighty British Empire down in India by protesting their oppression through non-violence.

My third *adhithana* sitting went by quickly in paying homage to those who understood the universal laws of life through *their own* experiences and experiments. I felt fortunate to at least have arrived at the school of self-discovering such knowledge even if I had been living my life thus far unaware of these principles. I could finally stop swimming counter-current and fighting gravity now that I knew which side was up having realised that water will always flow downhill no matter how hard you try to push it upwards.

The conducting teacher announced that starting late morning, some new students would also be allotted meditation cells to practice in complete isolation. I was elated to hear my name called out and I was assigned cell number 67 on the ground floor. It turned out that the enigmatic meditation cells were in a separate building, which was connected through a walkway over the roof of our main lodging quarters, and accessible through a door in the rear end of the *Dhamma* Hall.

Since we always entered the *Dhamma* Hall barefoot, there was a separate set of slippers (numbered to match our assigned meditation cells to avoid confusion) placed neatly on a rack outside, together with some light umbrellas, to facilitate the walk from the *Dhamma* Hall to the meditation cells.

I keenly followed the group of eager new students being escorted by one of the *dharma sevaks* to the Ritz Carlton

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of meditation sites available on campus. We all appeared especially exuberant because we were picked (probably alphabetically, but chose to believe it was based on some sort of merit!) to be in the first lot of new students to get the opportunity to use the cells. The only thing missing was a drumroll to accompany all the fanfare (at least that I was experiencing)! I walked through the concentrically circular chambers to find number 67, which was a corner cell, and I liked the look of it from the outside.

I gently opened the door and noticed a huge lizard zip right through the front wall and flash off to the adjacent cell, which seemed connected near the ceiling, probably to facilitate ventilation. I distinctly noticed that I was a lot less startled by the sight of an unseemly lizard than I would have been before joining the meditation camp. I sat down on a similar-looking cushion to the ones as in the *Dhamma* Hall and started to make myself comfortable. There were a couple of smaller extra cushions lying nearby, probably to place underneath the legs to make the cross-legged posture more comfortable for long sittings. I also flicked on the switch for the zero-wattage lamp in the room, which gave a nice touch to the full service meditative suite.

Just as I closed my eyes to start concentrating on the sensations at the crown of my head, the pounding sounds of hammers started from up above and it felt like the whole cell was reverberating from the repeated impact. I had noticed some scaffolding above the cells as we entered, and had looked up and seen some workers completing the construction of the dome of the building that housed the *shunyagars*.

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Knowing that the slightest sounds (especially when caught unawares by them) would easily unsettle me and spring me out of my seat, I started to consider how I could possibly meditate with such intense ambient noise. The lizard had also been on my mind, though less so than the hammering workers. I stayed put for another ten minutes, thinking I would manage to numb out the exterior once I got into the meditative zone, but it just wouldn't work.

I stepped out of my cell and slowly made my way outwards in awe of all those who were managing to concentrate despite the same loud noise, and started walking back towards the *Dhamma* Hall. The inner sanctum and the concentrically organised cells in the chamber gave it the feel of a typical monastery, from what I had seen in history-book pictures, not having visited one myself.

I ran into one of the more stern-looking *dharma sevaks* on the way back, who gently asked if I was encountering difficulties, as he saw me walk back without spending any real time in my newly allotted cell. I ashamedly admitted to feeling distracted by the construction noise and told him I might return in the afternoon if the workers were taking a break at that time. The quiet expression in his eyes seemed to convey, "Forgive them for they know not what they do," as he peacefully slanted his head to one side and let me depart feeling somewhat less guilty.

I now felt badly about the fact that I was part of the first batch of meditation cell allottees (amongst the new students) and had taken the opportunity to meditate in the cell from another student who might have been comfortable practicing with construction going on in the background. I couldn't



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muster the courage to approach the conducting teacher to reallocate the cell to someone else because that might also convey that I had no future interest in practicing meditation in the cell, which had seemed like a privilege. I had felt quite content with practicing in the comfortably open *Dhamma Hall*, which had continued to grow on me over the days. I also hadn't found my sleeping room a conducive setting for meditation because of too many distractions, chief among which was the inviting sight of the bed!

Discouraged by my maiden attempt at meditating in the solitary cell, I promptly lined up to ask the conducting teacher about my sensitivity to light, sound, and animals in the post-lunch Q&A. He patiently explained that we all possessed the power of patient tolerance, which enables us to withstand eternal stimuli, but it can sometimes become suppressed because of events in our lives. He suggested that I would be able to reawaken the power to tolerate such stimuli more calmly in four to six months if I kept up my meditation practice, especially towards light and sound; the sensitivity towards animals is usually more deep-seated, and would likely take longer to recalibrate.

Memories of childhood years when I was traumatised by a large bulldog, and the year of ragging in high school where we always slept semi-conscious and on alert, ready to fend off senior students who might surprise us with a bucket of cold water (or worse pranks) when fast asleep in our bunk beds, flashed through my mind. I felt encouraged that I might one day be able to please my wife by letting her continue to read or watch television when I wanted to go to sleep and not have to ask for a completely quiet and

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dark room to doze off at night.

I managed a short sitting in the *Dhamma* Hall before retiring to get some rest before the afternoon *adhitthana* sitting. I reflected on the fact that I had always wanted to write and perhaps find a way to publish a book. Never before could I find the idea or courage or time to overcome the initial inertia.

It now seemed as if the idea for the first book was a warm-up for the next one that had a more universally compelling and far reaching message. It was also reassuring that in case I had thought that getting the inspiration to plan one book in a short time window was a bit of a fluke, developing the idea for a second one simultaneously would certainly clear any doubt from my mind that the steep changes in creative expression, brain function, hand-mind coordination, and other enhancements were very real.

A sense of purpose was driving me from the inside to accomplish goals that were unimaginable for me and inconceivable even a few days ago, in a way I had never experienced before.

The last thing I would have expected going into a *Vipassana* meditation camp was that I would be planning two books in the span of ten days that were completely packed with meditation practice from 4:30 am to 9:30 pm! I chuckled thinking that perhaps these creative ideas were flooding my mind because this was the only way I could express myself under a strict code of silence for ten days. From someone as constantly switched on as I was used to being day in and day out, the unending barrage of thoughts had to find an outlet somehow. This cynical theory still couldn't explain

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the reactivated memory and vocabulary.

The afternoon group sitting started without much fanfare as we were all getting more and more used to sitting continuously for the full hour with lessening discomfort. The *adhitthana* sittings had driven a few more people to more comfortable locations or settings and the area around my cushion was now clear in three out of four directions. I felt for those who chose not to persist through the pain, as I conjectured that they wouldn't have possibly come to the same conclusions as I'd had about self regulable pain management.

After a few cycles back and forth from head to toes and back, I spent a few extra minutes in the head and face where I would typically experience more sensations. My theory was that the majority of the sensory organs – eyes, ears, nose, mouth – are all planted in our head and face so by definition the sensory experience is most pronounced in that region. When I raised this with him some time later, the conducting teacher's simple retort was that after all, the body's 'computer' was inside our head so we experience the sensations best closest to the transmission receiver's location.

After a thorough scanning of the head, as I moved past the neck and throat to my shoulders, I suddenly felt that the sensations I was feeling in my shoulders were a good foot or two below where I sensed my head was situated. I could almost point down below with my mind to the various organs in my torso and limbs. It was a completely surreal feeling of physical detachment and experiencing for the first time that my mind was not my body and was clearly dissociable

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from it. In some hard-to-express, outer body, mind-over-matter kind of way, it also helped me rationalise that the pain I had previously been experiencing in my back and right knee wasn't really happening to me...

I was late to the dining hall for the evening tea and snack and noticed that the only food item left was cut papaya, which was always in ample supply at breakfast and tea-time. The self-explanatory look from the *dharma sevak* who was coordinating the meal conveyed that the kitchen was out of any other fruits or snacks. I had probably tasted papaya all of three times in my life and had always had to overpower its aftertaste with some other more tasty food item! If I didn't consume anything with tea, I would have to go without eating for over 18 hours, and wasn't sure if my body was quite ready to handle such extended starvation.

I formulated a plan to gobble up a few pieces of papaya, purely for its nutritive value, and douse it quickly with some black ginger-tea. As the first cut piece of the fruit touched my palate and slowly melted in my mouth, I could hardly believe that I was enjoying the taste of papaya, which I had decided to eat purely out of desperation and lack of an alternative form of nourishment. Though it's possible that all the other papaya I had ever tasted in the past were bad tasting, knowing myself well, I knew the more realistic explanation was that my mind had overcome an ill-formed prejudice, which was likely based on limited and biased information.

Evening group meditation was uneventful aside from the fact that I opened my eyes ten minutes before the designated hour was up as a wave of impatience surged through me. I

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promised myself that this would be the only sitting in which I broke the *adhitthana* and managed to do so for the rest of the program. It was interesting that my patience wore out more easily in a timed session on the same day that I had overshot an untimed session by ten minutes earlier the same morning.

I reconciled this by thinking that two sessions averaged each other out and settled myself down after a short break to follow the next day's instructions. The overall procedure remained the same except we were now to scan symmetric body parts (e.g., eyes, ears, limbs) together in pairs when sequentially stepping through the body to experience sensations back and forth from head to toes.

*Gurujī* started the evening discourse by reminding us that three full days were left for real practice of *Vipassana* as we would be breaking the noble silence on the morning of the tenth day, which would make practicing meditation that day much harder. His message for the discourse was oriented towards highlighting the five hindrances (or enemies, as he chose to describe them) to maintaining a steady meditation practice, especially after we left the camp.

These obstacles were cravings, aversions, mental and physical laziness, agitation and skepticism. In different ways, these forces would try to get in the way and we must find our own way to overcome each of them and continue to stay the course and find time to practice. He encouraged us to be aware and equanimous every moment, regardless of whatever sensation we experience, and to train the mind to experience that all sensations are transient.

*Gurujī* shared the analogy of how a walking route, that

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was once well known, can be covered with undergrowth and infested with snakes and other reptiles if people stop walking on it. Later, if people refer to having knowledge of the route only in conversation, it doesn't amount to the same thing as knowing how to traverse it. If someone tried to go down the same track, he would quickly get discouraged by the hardship in locating a clearly visible path, and would come back to report that the path actually no longer existed and would discourage others from attempting to follow it. Much in the same way, the practice of *Vipassana* became extinct from the Indian subcontinent.

*Guruji* highlighted that several other sages like Guru Nanak, Mahavir and Kabir seemingly understood the concept of *Vipassana* through their own experiences as can be intuited from their writings and hymns. Interestingly, I had concluded the same for the likes of Frankl and Gandhi earlier the same day. While these greats understood the universal life processes and concepts through their self discoveries and first hand experiences, they weren't active practitioners of *Vipassana* who could also teach the technique to others, and thus it was lost over recent centuries.

Similarly, references to the underlying concepts of impermanence and understanding (or experiencing) truth by observation can also be found in several old Indian texts like the Rig Veda or the Bhagavad Gita, but their experiential knowledge had largely been reduced to reciting the scriptures with little recognition or attention to the in-depth meaning they were intended to convey.

I came back to my room and lay flat on my back and thought there was absolutely no way I could go back to

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living the same way I did before I came upon *Vipassana*. All these years of learning how to be a talented engineer, a good son, brother, husband, an analytical researcher, and lately an effective consultant, I had missed out on the most important learning – how to live life.

I felt as if I was being reborn – a new mind and conscience in the same physical form – and was getting a chance to lead a more meaningful and balanced life.





Day 7

## Mind Metamorphosis



I slept in a semi-conscious state overnight yet woke up feeling completely rested. By this time, I was operating on a maximum of four hours of sleep and still felt better than ever before after a night's rest. I was beginning to appreciate *Guruji's* theory that our physical bodies need a lot less time to rest every day than we think. It's the mind that tires (us) out more, and needs to relax for much longer to recharge itself for the next day. I drew some complex correlations between sleeping and mental exhaustion from past personal experiences when I'd had trouble falling asleep (or waking up well-rested) because there was 'a lot on my mind'.

It's as if the thoughts about past events and future possibilities, our hopes and expectations, our likes and dislikes, insults and appreciations that occupy our minds run like background processes in the processor of our brain.

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While in its foreground, our mind is consciously consumed with and outwardly focused on some activity, its remaining capacity is being consumed with background thoughts similar to a computer processor when multiple software applications are open and running in the background.

Much in the same way as the computer application we are working with in the foreground responds faster when we close all the other applications open in the background, our brain's ability to process information and make accurate judgment calls improves significantly if we can put aside all other thoughts about the past and the future (neither of which are time frames where we can take any present action) and also stop placing a value judgment on whether we consider certain events, individuals or circumstances as good versus bad.

While this is another finding that seems logical and intuitive at an intellectual understanding level, it can truly only be appreciated and internalised by our unconscious mind when it experiences such learning first hand. Otherwise, it's simply an intriguing theoretically plausible construct that we cannot draw upon practically in our own life, and will thus seem like an unachievable state of mind.

At some level, we have all experienced that when we can make our brains concentrate on a specific activity at hand and try to consciously tune out the ambient, our mental productivity shows marked improvement. The corresponding exponential improvement in brain functioning I was experiencing when *all* the extraneous background processes had ceased to exist felt nothing short of opening a 'third eye' in the mind and applying its expanded capabilities in

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a more purposeful, targeted, powerful and hyper-effective way. And all this, while simultaneously feeling a greater sense of compassion towards other living beings, so it didn't feel like some sort of robotic productivity.

All these days I had been concerned with ensuring I had some memory aids to recapitulate later what I was experiencing at the camp so it wouldn't fade away like a dream when I re-entered the real world. I now knew that the changes I had experienced were indelibly irreversible, and there was no possible way I could go back to the way things were in the past. I felt this not because someone had waved a magic wand and turned the frog into a prince, but because I had realised that the power to unlock the equanimity in my mind, which in turn had led to significant mental and physical benefits, was in my own hands.

I was experiencing these changes because of a learnable meditation process and not because of some oracular miracle that worked but couldn't be explained with a sound set of rationale. There was a clear and simple logical basis for what I was experiencing – clearing the mind of what we cannot control (past and future) and not spending any mental energy craving or avoiding things (both of which are impermanent). This enables a state of continuous happiness and ability to apply mental capacities more productively towards purposeful things and those that we can positively impact in the present moment with our actions.

Having self-experienced these principles in action, I knew first hand that there was no flaw in the logic. Even if someone were to debate it with me, all I would say is that I am stating what I have experienced directly, which is the

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only truth that I am technically obligated and entitled to believe. This experiential ‘learn by doing’ approach had truly resonated with me.

Throughout my years of education, I had trouble taking the theories and frameworks in my textbooks for granted. I only chose to believe as much as I could test and experiment with in subsequent practical laboratory work. I focused on learning the most fundamental and basic ( $2 + 2 = 4$ ) types of first principles. I did not trust the subsequent theoretical findings unless I could myself, using inductive and deductive logic, conclude the same end-results as were asserted in the textbooks when physical experimentation was not an option – for example, when calculating the pressure head of a body of water in the containing reservoir for a large dam.

Through what I was actually experiencing directly and drawing the logical link between my own efforts at learning *Vipassana* for a week and extrapolating forward to continuing its practice in my life, and having thus concluded that the benefits of introspective meditation could lead to a happier and more productive life, there was no way my reasonably logical mind would allow me to journey back to an anxious and less fulfilling life. Even though my life had been complete and satisfactory in so many material ways, I simply hadn’t known that my mind could learn to soar so much higher.

The only commensurate parallel I could draw to the experience I was undergoing was to that of a caterpillar, which is merrily enjoying its life grazing on leafy greens on a tree, and can scarcely imagine that through a transformative process of pupa formation it would turn into a butterfly one day and learn to fly! My mind had gone through the

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same process of metamorphosis. There was no way to turn the flying colourful butterfly back into the green caterpillar trying to camouflage itself on the branch of the tree to avoid its avian predators.

I had requested a small ball of cotton overnight, which magically appeared in the morning as a second wake up call when one of the *dharma sevaks* smilingly knocked on my door at 4:25 am. I intended to roll up the cotton as improvised earplugs that might enable me to sit through the construction noise during another follow on attempt to go back to the individual cells for meditation. I started with using them for the pre-dawn and post-breakfast sessions, when I planned to meditate in the main *Dhamma* Hall to first get used to the idea of cotton ear plugs in more familiar surroundings.

I found it slightly easier to concentrate with my new earplugs but discovered that certain sounds (like that of the kitchen staff loading up steel utensils in a trolley-cart and dragging it down the length of the dining hall, which was right below the *Dhamma* Hall) can only be neutralised through expensive noise cancellation headsets! Yet, I persisted because I knew that without even the minimum auricular muffler, I wouldn't be giving myself a chance against the hammering sounds later in the day once the construction workers resumed their activities above the building with the *shunyagars*.

I started to focus on meditating with the additional instruction – cycling through the body and scanning the symmetrical parts of the body together. My mind operated like one of those thermal scanners, which move across an area and capture the infrared heat map, and was similarly

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capturing the map of sensations observed as it moved from head to toes. I was beginning to experience sensations more easily and clearly in various body parts in addition to the head and face. I also would stop feeling any aches and pains as soon as my concentration stabilised.

Various unrelated thoughts crossed my mind. I started thinking how the whole notion of craving and aversion had applied so accurately to how I managed my personal and professional relationships and how I was living in a world of self-fulfilling prophecies. I was always quick to pass judgment on whether I liked or disliked someone. I frankly prided myself on having good instincts about people even when I'd had limited exposure to them. I wonder why being able to accurately predict someone's character or likability through a short set of interactions is considered a sign of good intuition in the first place, as if there was a prize for those who can accurately judge a book by its cover or by reading the first chapter or introduction?!

When I liked someone, I would naturally and selflessly go out of my way to help that person and tend to overlook their deficiencies. On the other hand, when I disliked someone, not only would I easily show it because of my open-book personality and style, I also found myself pulling away from them and could at times be unpleasant if they truly did something that I found offensive.

Those I liked enjoyed the benefits of my friendship and loyalty continuously without me ever questioning or rethinking the basis of my fondness for them. Interestingly, the only thing that would make me consider changing my mind about those I liked was if they did something that

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signified strong disloyalty or demeaned my value or input in an important matter. While I was persuadable with logic, if the other person's logic didn't meet my acid-test bar, I expected them to adhere to my line of thinking, especially those that I liked and had invested in.

I realised how this distinction in my views was entirely because of how my ego felt when I encountered seemingly rebellious behaviour from those I had nourished with affection. I understood how my approach to managing relationships was flawed at multiple levels, first in making evaluative judgments, while *Dhamma* prescribes an equanimous mindset towards both likes and dislikes, and secondly in how it was *my ego* that drove my judgement and not the pure objective facts of the case. As I fully processed and internalised these revelations, I started to feel a complete 180 degree shift in my new orientation of compassionate equanimity towards anyone and everyone.

With this simple yet profound self revelation, I couldn't help contrasting how I now felt about an argument with my father and wife only a week before about the choice of flooring in our new family house that was under construction. They could now choose any material they wanted and it would be all the same to me, and very happily so.

The only suggestion I now had for the construction adventure was that we name our new house *Samata* (equanimity), as that would represent the state of mind I would wish the members of my family who resided there to enjoy. If my family didn't like my suggestion for naming the house, it wouldn't affect me the least bit, as I would want them to be happy with their preferred choice!

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I had lived my entire life thus far optimising and solving for what felt right to *me* and what was good for *me* as opposed to being driven by a greater sense of purpose and having clarity for the absolute truth (right versus wrong) and fairness towards everyone. *Vipassana* had rung true to its name as the process of viewing things objectively and expansively from all different angles.

I reflected on all the positive benefits that I had drawn with only a week of employing the *Vipassana* technique and how seismically my mindset and behavioural orientation had changed. I then started to think about what it would be like when I returned to my life as a consultant, with clients and colleagues, and with my friends and family that had all known and experienced me in a certain way.

A case in point – I had come to a fairly informed conclusion that I would find it easy to give up alcohol because I had discovered that my pre-existing logical basis to consume it to relax the mind was flawed, if I was also to believe that continuous happiness can only be achieved through a highly vigilant and equanimous mind. I figured most of my family wouldn't mind my resolve to abstain from drinking but certain friends, colleagues and clients might find it a bit odd.

I didn't want some of my close friends to feel less intimate with me because of the lifestyle changes I would adopt when I resumed my regular and active social life. I later felt that those who truly cared for me wouldn't sever ties simply because I would make different choices about how I was planning to live my life in the future. I probably had such thoughts because with my old mindset, *I* might



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have considered a close friend to seem less familiar if they dropped an activity (like drinking) that we had jointly enjoyed in the past and associated with as an essential mark of our friendship. After all, how can you remain ‘drinking buddies’ with someone who no longer drinks?!

*Upma* (savoury semolina snack) was served for breakfast and I ingested small mouthfuls slowly as I pondered how I would practically integrate what I was learning at the camp into my regular life so that the nascent and recently metamorphosed butterfly of my mind wouldn’t be trapped in a spider’s web on its maiden flight. I was hopeful that the rest of the days at the camp would help me find answers to how I would live my new life in the outside world while following the path of *Dhamma*.

During my post-breakfast morning walk ritual, I reflected further on *Gurujī*’s analogy of the ten-day meditation camp being similar to a complex medical surgery. The tumor had now been cleanly removed and healthy new cells were beginning to regrow inside the impaired organ, but the external surface incision had yet to be sutured up, and I felt all raw and tender inside. It was important to not allow any visitors into the operating room as the chances of infecting the opened up body were still high.

The daily walks had increasingly become more energising as I was more aware of my surroundings and drawing vitality from the sights of the flowers and trees and the sounds of the morning birds. Later in the morning during group meditation, I did six sets of back and forth full body scans in the hour long session. It computed that the cycle time for each scan should take roughly half the time

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now that we were covering symmetrical organs together.

I was eager to speak with the conducting teacher about my queries on sustaining *Vipassana* and its principles in everyday life and headed up as soon as the short break post-meditation was announced. He told me reassuringly that the next several days (including one of the entire evening discourses) would be dedicated to the practical aspects of meditation after the camp was over, but agreed to take a couple of short questions.

I started with my predicament about deciding to quit drinking but maintaining a circle of friends who considered me their drinking buddy. He sympathised and gave me the example of his neighbour who was a teetotaler and yet a very prolific businessman who had employed a manager specifically to take care of entertaining all his customers.

That said, he told me that it was okay to consume alcohol in moderation if I really must drink socially. I clarified that it no longer made sense to drink because I had uncovered that alcohol actually leads to the opposite effect than I had intended and expected from it all along. The question was no longer about moderation versus abstention, but about managing the social and business optic of not drinking.

*Acharyaji* (the conducting teacher) smiled in acknowledgement as if to convey that I had grasped the essence of the instruction and went on to explain that three things would happen over the next four to six months as I made *Vipassana* an integral part of my life.

1. I would naturally and gradually convince some of my friends and family to follow the path of *Dhamma* and practice *Vipassana*,

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2. Some of my current circle of friends would choose to distance themselves because they might experience the feeling “we have lost our friend to some voodoo practice”, and
3. Some new people would enter my circle of acquaintances and friends who were already familiar with or in the process of learning about the benefits of *Vipassana*.

A seasoned consultant couldn't have better summarised the various possibilities in a mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive (or MECE) manner. Since I was getting a brief but rich audience with a learned *Vipassana* practitioner of nearly 30 years, I figured I would layer in another paradoxical question.

I asked *Acharyaji* that if we shouldn't have any attachment towards outcomes (as *Dhamma* legislates), how can we pursue various business and other life goals with passion and intensity? He smiled again, this time expressing mentoring affection at my nascent understanding of the deeper concepts. He explained that we must naturally continue to set ambitious targets and strive hard to achieve them, but *Vipassana* would help develop the equanimity to enable us to remain calm and not become agitated if those targets are not achieved due to unexpected circumstances.

His answer made complete sense – strive to achieve lofty goals but in a detached manner so as to avoid over-excitement or disappointment based on the actual outcomes. Seeing my look of illumination with his satisfying explanation to my conundrum, *Acharyaji* enquired how my meditation practice was going. I told him that I thought it was going

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well and that I was finally experiencing little to no pain during the sittings.

Only a few days before, he had offered me to take back support or the use of a chair when I was in complete agony during the initial *adhitthana* sittings. I had politely and gratefully declined, as I had wanted to test the limits of my pain tolerance further and certainly hadn't wanted to chicken out without giving it my level best. At the time, I had noticed some disabled and elderly people attempting to manage their discomfort without chairs, so it had seemed unbecoming for me to take the easy way out. I was now glad to report that the pain had gradually subsided and eventually disappeared. His final smile for this short Q&A implied, "I knew so!"

I made another valiant attempt at practicing in my designated individual meditation cell in the open session after lunch. But I quickly beat a retreat to my room because the improvised cotton earplugs were no match against the seemingly deafening construction noise. I didn't have the heart to go back to the *Dhamma* Hall for fear of distracting other meditators.

It was clear that the meditation cell wasn't my cup of tea. I was really enjoying the course but this aspect didn't appeal to me as it appeared to appeal to other students. I enjoyed the group effect while meditating in the *Dhamma* Hall as it created an atmosphere of joint practice. I drew inspiration from some of the serious meditators in my vicinity whenever I felt my resolve to sit through the one hour *adhitthana* sessions was weakening.

It had been a full week since I had arrived at the

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camp and my quarters could use a cleaning. I started with sweeping my room and went through it twice to cover spots I missed in the first go around. Satisfied with my skills with the broom, I turned my attention to washing the bathroom with a phenyl solution, which was a bit more work and I had to roll up my track pants so as not to soak them in dirty water. I found the whole process surprisingly relaxing.

Having not done this sort of work with my own two hands in many years (and rarely at that), it seemed that I had forgotten to adequately value service staff. I also noted that when I sat back after the short but hard labour, the last thing on my mind when I was cleaning was how much sound I might be making with my cleaning activities. I only had to do this work once in a very long while, so I stretched my imagination to consider what it must be like for those who did this sort of work full time, day in and day out.

Having spent half an hour cleaning my quarters and thus stepping into the kitchen workers' shoes, whose cooking and cleaning sounds had been an annoying interference with my meditation practice, gave me perspective that no amount of contemplative empathy and consciously reminding myself of the value of tediously laborious and menial work could have ever done. Clearly, I still needed to learn how to cope with any displeasing surroundings in a better way and remain equanimous (yet aware) at every moment. *Acharyaji* had explained that there were always negative stressors coming at us from all angles and the key was in neutralising them and not conditioning our unconscious mind to try and avoid them.

Having correlated from first-hand experience that

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cleaning utensils was no less a vocation or labour of love for the kitchen workers than counselling my clients was for me, I felt I would now have a better chance at not classifying the construction or other noise as negative distractions to my meditative practice. I also wondered how often I would associate a negative assessment to the impact an activity had on me which might be someone else's livelihood or day-to-day routine.

I reflected how the same might be true in reverse – that people might experience activities that I conduct in my 'normal' life as distractions or irritants to them. A road worker breaking up the pavement with a jackhammer and creating a lot of noise is going about earning his daily bread just as I would zip wildly through airports at times to make my flights and probably inducing some anxiety in those I was speedily passing by!

The afternoon *adhithana* sitting was the most tranquil I had experienced thus far. I didn't feel any impatience in wanting the session to end and most of the sensations I experienced were subtle and diffuse, with only a few spots where I felt gross and localised sensations. All the new students stayed back for individual check-ups and I waited my group's turn. *Acharyaji* skipped past me because we had talked earlier in the day and he was caught up on the state of my practice.

One of the students in my group was still struggling and asked despondently, "Is it possible that some people don't respond to this technique at all?" It was clear that he had been trying his level best and it must be disappointing to make the significant personal commitment to spend ten

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days away from work and family and then not draw much benefit from the process you came to learn.

*Acharyaji* was quite empathetic but responded honestly that in every course there are a handful of students who didn't respond to the technique. However, most were able to get something out of it as long as they followed the instructions properly and practiced diligently. He emphasised that every individual's experience with *Vipassana* is unique and encouraged the student to stay strong and motivated.

The rest of the time was appropriately devoted to problem-solving this student's case as the third student in the group was progressing very well. At one point, out of genuine concern, the third student asked the first student a question about how much surface area of the body the first one was focusing on during the scan for sensations. Before the first student could answer, *Acharyaji* reminded us that students were not supposed to talk amongst each other and any questions must only be directed to him.

In conclusion, *Acharyaji* instructed the first student to go back and do the basic breathing observation (*Aana Pana*) for a few sessions to sharpen the mind to experience sensations and then resume *Vipassana*. I really felt for the guy and sincerely hoped that with patience and perseverance, he would also start experiencing the benefits of the technique.

The noteworthy milestone as I completed the evening group sitting was that in all four of the one-hour continuous sittings during the day (the pre-dawn one, and the morning, afternoon, evening *adhitthanas*), I had managed to use the same weight bearing leg in my cross-legged posture. In days prior, I had been alternating the right and left legs between

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sessions to give one leg time to recover while the other one bore the weight.

I distinctly remembered *Guruji* saying something in the discourses during the initial days to the effect that we would eventually manage to develop the capacity to meditate on the same weight-bearing leg for hours together without pain or discomfort. I had genuinely thought at the time that he must be referring to some other brave souls, because certainly I wouldn't possibly arrive at such a stage in my practice.

It was amazing how with just a week's continuous and determined practice, a seemingly impossible and arduous task had been accomplished. The wisdom of the clichéd phrases 'it's all in the mind' and 'mind over matter' rang true after all. I had also decided to lose the ear plugs for this final sitting of the day and that seemed to have worked out well. I didn't feel too distracted by the same ambient sounds that had been just as evident in earlier sessions.

*Guruji* started the evening discourse by describing how various students might be encountering difficulty sleeping and advised us not to worry if we were unable to sleep as much as we were accustomed to. He further explained that it was a good sign if we were experiencing semi-conscious sleep because it's only a reactive mind that tires of taking unnecessary and anxiety-inducing actions all day and an equanimous mind needs less time to recharge its batteries. The body tires of physical activity and thus needs some rest but not nearly as much as a completely exhausted mind does.

Thus those experiencing the need for less sleep (yet feeling adequately refreshed), were beginning to see the



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effects of quietening their mind. He joked that while there was a saying that, “When the rest of the world sleeps, a *Vipassana* practitioner stays awake”, we shouldn’t interpret that to mean that we should force ourselves to pull all-nighters in order to demonstrate allegiance to the technique!

The other yardstick he mentioned that was often a good indicator of whether the practice was taking root in various students was the extent to which people felt the urge to help others to draw benefit from the technique. He even went so far as to say that authors would write about it, orators would give speeches, people with material possessions would want to provide the means for others to experience the learning process, and so on. I smiled on the inside because I had been experiencing all these feelings for some time now and to quite a degree.

If *Guruji’s* assessment of the direct proportionality was true, I figured my mind must have latched on to the technique fairly well given I was planning to write a mass-market book to build awareness of the benefits of *Vipassana* and I wasn’t even an amateur author!

He reminded us that through the simple yet powerful process of observing sensations on our physical body, we had slowly started to dismantle the communication barrier between our conscious and unconscious minds and facilitated an understanding of how our thoughts and actions, when we experience either favourable or unfavourable circumstances, determine whether our mind remains equanimous or becomes anxious. He recapitulated that cravings, aversions, and the ego are the root causes of all misery, and a perfectly equanimous mind has achieved mastery over all of them.

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*Guriji* apprised those of us who might be experiencing meaningful benefits not to become complacent, because this initial stage was simply a rest stop in the overall journey to achieving complete mastery over the senses and detachment from all outcomes. Those who mistake this intermediate stage as the final destination might allow their meditative efforts to subside and miss out on drawing full value from the technique. As with any major change journey we had to stay the course, as it would be easy to fall back into old habits. He reminded us that the ultimate yardstick for measuring progress is by the equanimity one develops towards every sensation and life situation.

I thought to myself that I was probably drawing more benefit from the process because I had built up a greater pressure head (impending force contained in a column of liquid) of impetus for change given how much (and how long) of an indulgent life I had led chasing material and sensory pursuits. Water gushes out with rapidity from a hole in the side of a bucket filled to the brim and trickles out slowly from one that only contains a little bit of water. Much in the same way, I'd had my share of worldly pleasures and a lifestyle of sensory overload so that the transformation momentum I was experiencing was much greater.

Had I only been marginally off-centered, perhaps I wouldn't have drawn as much benefit from this ten-day experience. Having alerted us to the various obstacles in maintaining continuous meditation practice the previous day, *Guriji* now described the five forces that would come to our aid if we tried to follow the virtuous path of *Dhamma* – faith (not of the religious kind, but in the technique), effort (for

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which there was no substitute), awareness, concentration, and wisdom.

Since we were nearing the end of the course, *Guruji* decided to revisit religious beliefs and practices. He had asked that we put these aside (without being critical of them) for the duration of the course so we could focus our entire mindshare on learning a new technique and not dilute its impact by potentially mixing the self-created concoction of our religious rites with *Vipassana*.

He reiterated that people from any religious belief and background can successfully learn and practice *Vipassana*. He clarified and reassured everyone that it was perfectly fine to maintain faith in whichever incarnation (or name) of God that we most strongly believed in and talked at length about the admirable qualities in the various representations of God from different religions.

His principal thought was that instead of unconstructively debating supremacy of religions and the various images of God, it was more important to actually try and truly embody the great characteristics of whichever representation we chiefly admired. Too often, despite our vociferously stated allegiance to a certain figure of God, our day to day actions are quite incongruent with that Godhead's celebrated qualities.

We received abbreviated instructions for the following day to attempt partial or complete free-flowing full-body sweeps (back and forth from head to toes) if we were experiencing mostly subtle sensations during our part by part body scans by that time. If some parts were experiencing gross and solidified sensations, we were to scan those

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individually after the partial free flow. Even if we managed a complete free flow, we would go through the part by part scan after a few cycles.

I eagerly awaited the following day to further deepen and strengthen my resolve to blend the practice of meditation into my new life after the camp.

Day 8

## Emotional Physics



The exercise for the day, if we had managed to achieve a state in our meditation practice where most of the body was experiencing subtle sensations, was to attempt *dharah pravah* (free-flowing full sweeps) of the body. The analogy was with the free flow of a bucket of water being poured over the head, soaking every part of the body.

The exercises had continued to become progressively harder and I predicted that it would be fun and challenging to tackle this one. I got into position at 4:32 am and first went through the sequential body scan to get ready for the full sweep. This was a lot harder than it seemed, not just because of the pace of the free flow but also because it was hard to maintain sharp concentration on multiple body parts simultaneously and also maintain the downward (or upward) flow.

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I tried to pace myself and found that if I went too slowly, I lost track of which body part I was scanning and where I was heading next. Too fast, and I was skipping past certain body parts. Regardless of pace, I found it hard to include the arms in the full sweep as it was easiest for the ‘scanning water’ to flow down from the head to torso and the arms were left ‘dry’ as they were resting down on the knees. I started wondering about the placement of my arms in the meditative posture and made a mental note to ask *Acharyaji*.

I noted with amusement that I had progressed to relatively advanced aspects of meditation when only a few days ago I was struggling with just focusing my mind on my own breathing and on observing basic bodily sensations. Trying various things to optimise the full-body sweep technique, I discovered that taking deeper breaths was helping me maintain the right pace and concentration. I would take a deep and long breath – inhaling would pull my mind’s concentration from toes towards the head and exhaling would push it down from head to toes.

I recalled that a yoga instructor had once taught this form of breathing called *ujjai* breathing in yogic parlance, in a class at the local YMCA in Montclair, New Jersey that my wife and I attended infrequently. While deep breathing was a kind of learning crutch, I was glad I could employ it usefully to at least experience the full sweep technique. I promised myself not to get too comfortable with the training wheels and slowly wean myself off of the *ujjai* breaths to manage the momentum of my concentration. The entire hour went by quickly in familiarising my mind with the full-body scans.

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I was beginning to have mixed feelings about the approaching conclusion of the camp. I was happy that I would soon be reunited with my family and simultaneously felt that I had hardly scratched the surface of mastering a powerfully liberating technique. Even if I generously estimated that each day I spent at the camp effectively served to rewrite a year's worth of previous conditioning from my most recent past, I would only go back to the time as I had started my professional career. There was still a lot more life I had experienced in years further past. Clearly, ten days was a very short period of time to fully soak in the learning well of *Dhamma*.

I remembered that I had initially asked the course registrar during the internet-based registration whether I could leave a few hours earlier on the final morning to fly back to Singapore a day earlier. I was told that would not be permissible and that I should only plan to register for the course at a time when I was ready to spare the full ten days.

I had reasoned with the registrar over email that departing a few hours early would save me one extra vacation day and allow me to return to work on the first business day of the New Year. The registrar had retorted politely that in the event that I had important work commitments that conflicted with the ten-day schedule, I should plan to skip this particular *Vipassana* course and register for another one at a more convenient time.

I felt fortunate to have heeded his advice and moved my return flight to the following day, as I now wanted every remaining minute and hour to stretch out just a little bit

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longer so the learning could etch deeply on my mind.

I stepped out onto the courtyard as the morning chants were commencing and sat down to look at the pre-dawn sky, still littered with the brighter stars and the waning moon. While I wanted to slow down time to extend the *Vipassana* learning opportunity, there was a sense of anticipation for things I now felt I had to do when I resumed my regular life. I was looking forward to calling the people I wanted to apologise to as soon as I left the camp. Even though I had experienced an inside-out mental transformation, I hadn't lost my memory of how I would have felt under ordinary circumstances about apologising.

Typically, I would often have conciliatory conversations yet stopped short of making a clean apology (one that clearly said "I am sorry", and didn't also involve a justification or qualifier), probably because it would be too strong a self-inflicted injury to the ego to accept full responsibility for a mistake. I now wanted to apologise as clearly and directly as possible because the big brick walls of my ego had come crumbling down and a flood of empathy for those I might have wronged had permeated my consciousness.

In the past, I would feel justified in expressing how I felt about something in the name of 'saying it like it is' without being sufficiently mindful of the impact it would have on those at the receiving end. Reassessing certain such recent situations objectively, despite re-concluding that my read of the situation was often accurate, I realised now how misguided my disproportionate response was towards others in expressing my concerns or frustration with them.

In the same vein, I used to believe that doing whatever



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it took at all costs was the hallmark of people who were truly committed to achieving high standards in their profession. Never once did I step back and realise that others, who I would judge as not meeting my high standards for excellence, might also care about ambitious results, but also care about the nature of the means used in achieving them. The journey mattered to them just as much as arriving at the destination, while I was too preoccupied with stepping on the pedal to charge ahead, harder and faster.

I had conjectured that the menu for the meals in the dining hall might be repeated after a week and was reassured to notice the same items served for breakfast as on the first day. I picked up my laundry and headed back to my room to change out of the track pants I had been wearing into a clean pair of jeans. As I pulled them on, I found that I had to tighten my belt a couple of extra notches to keep the jeans from slipping down. I had a sense that I might be losing weight because of the minimalistic meals but the elastic-waisted track pants I had been wearing had masked the extent of shrinkage in my waistline. My face hadn't revealed the loss of flab as it was covered with a week's worth of growing facial hair.

Together with all the mental benefits, it felt good to note some positive health-related side effects as well. I was now eager to get to a weighing scale soon but estimated that I might need to wait until I got back to Singapore because I would be over-nighting in a guest house with my wife and in-laws in Mumbai before travelling back, and the odds were low I would find one there.

The group session after breakfast felt effortless, pain-free,

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and the most natural thing to do. Until just the previous day I couldn't wait to stretch my legs as soon as the long hour of practice was finally over, but I now continued sitting there in the meditative posture well past the announcement of the short break as if that was the only thing that made sense.

*Guruji* had emphasised that our practice must be nearly continuous in the last couple of days aside from the designated breaks for meals and rest. It had sounded like a stretch earlier, but it now seemed like the only logical option given the limited time left at the camp with my aim to have an indelible imprint of this way of life on my mind.

As I continued meditating in the *Dhamma* Hall, *Acharyaji* asked for all new students to stay back for another check-up because we were nearing the end of the course and it was important that all of us got the essentials of the technique down before leaving the camp. I couldn't help but overhear some of the questions posed by other students to *Acharyaji* while I was waiting for our group's turn.

One of the questions was how we would know that the benefits of *Vipassana* were truly filtering into our lives? *Acharyaji* said that different people would experience a range of different positive changes and cited his own example that when he first started meditating, his mind unleashed his creativity and improved his memory. Overhearing this, my ears tuned in even more closely as I felt validated in what I was experiencing, and not going through some manic and unexpected surge in mental functioning.

At this point, I felt comfortable listening more intently to the Q&A *Acharyaji* was having with other students because these same questions were likely on all of our minds, so

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it was appropriate to draw benefit from the generally relevant interchange. *Acharyaji* addressed the next question on anger management and asked the students to mindfully notice incremental positive improvements and not fixate on situations that might still be hard to handle well.

Going a step further and pre-empting a likely follow-up question about domestic life, he went on and said, “Often the wife might say, ‘How come you still get angry now that you practice *Vipassana*? Clearly, whatever you are doing isn’t really working!’ And yet, we must carefully assess whether we maintain equanimity in even one out of ten situations that we would typically draw ire from us. If so, that would be a sign of progress and we must not get disappointed about the other 90%. Slowly, with continued practice, we will become increasingly equanimous in more and more difficult situations.”

*Acharyaji* drew the analogy with the nature and pace of progress our country (India) was making. While it was very easy to find fault with everything that still needed work (roads, corruption, population explosion, illiteracy), some of the improvements were distinctly noteworthy (economic growth, relevance on the world stage).

He also mentioned that one of his role models for equanimous individuals is India’s current Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, whom he described as a man with a penetrating vision to help advance the nation in the right direction. He remained calm even in the most difficult of situations, for instance when he came under fierce attack for the recent Commonwealth Games in India or when his government was at risk of being dissolved because the

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coalition parties were threatening to withdraw their support. Most other political leaders might have shown some signs of agitation, but he was completely unperturbed and maintained a steady focus on helping India to become a more advanced and progressive nation.

*Acharyaji* counselled us also to self-evaluate our progress in a fair and realistic manner and not feel intimidated by the fact that there still might be a long way to go in order to maintain perfect equanimity at all times. While it was good to have that as a long term goal, it was important to calibrate incremental progress in a reasonable way commensurate with how long, and how much, we have been practicing. I decided to save my questions for a private opportunity because they were of a more personal nature, and let the other students ask their questions when our group was called up.

I lunched quickly and went back to my room to think through a few questions I intended to ask *Acharyaji* at 12:30 pm after the official Q&A session open to all students was over, as I had pre-arranged a private meeting through one of the friendly *dharma sevaks*. I headed up to the *Dhamma* Hall at 12:20 pm so I might get an extra minute or two with *Acharyaji* in case he wasn't meeting with another student and I could also catch the tail end of the official Q&A slot.

Ironically, *Acharyaji* was waiting for me in his sleeping room, which also served as his office for private meetings, while I was counting down the minutes to 12:30 pm in the *Dhamma* Hall waiting for him to arrive. My newly befriended *dharma sevak* came to the rescue and called *Acharyaji* from his room to the *Dhamma* Hall. Making himself comfortable

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in his meditation chair, he asked “*poocho?*” (“What do you want to know?” in Hindi).

I knew I could do a lot with 25 minutes of private time with *Acharyaji* so got straight to work. I started with thanking him, and *Guruji*, and the *dharma sevaks* for the gift of creating an environment for me to learn this life-changing technique. As the words left my mouth, I noticed that they didn’t feel like a perfunctory ‘thank you’, but true heartfelt gratitude, more genuine than I had ever expressed before to anyone.

He nodded in acknowledgement and said I was lucky that my wife was a believer in the benefit of *Vipassana*. It can be hard to sustain practice after getting back home if the spouse is not supportive or worse downright dismissive of the technique. It was as if he had read my mind about wanting his practical advice on how to maintain the continuity and discipline towards meditation after leaving the camp.

It was my turn to nod acknowledgingly and I said that I was experiencing a lot of the benefits *Guruji* had talked about in the discourses and also along the lines of what I had overheard from his Q&A conversation with another set of students about unleashing memory and creativity.

*Acharyaji* asked me how educated I was and whether I had any training in mathematics. I didn’t understand the implication of his question and also didn’t want to sound egotistical about my doctorate in engineering and high interest and skill in quantitative and analytical subjects. So I mumbled something to the effect that I had a PhD and that mathematics was one of my favourite subjects in school.

My diminishing sense of ego stopped me from adding

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the side-bar tidbits about my technical skills that I would typically include when such a question came up in the past. It turned out to be a good idea not to harp on my mathematical abilities because *Acharyaji* had asked the question for a much simpler reason.

I later reflected on how pre-conditioned I was, whether due to upbringing and schooling in a hyper-competitive environment or because of my own insecurities, to layer in extra credentials and accolades when asked a simple question about essential qualifications! Perhaps my mind was always in the mode of proving to the other person (or clients) that I (or my teams) were well qualified for the job at hand or perhaps my years in the US had trained me that modesty was not a valuable virtue in the cut-throat business world in which I operated.

*Acharyaji* simply wanted to explain a concept using two orthogonal axes, which is why he had asked if I knew mathematics! It was a fair question to ask because people from all walks of life – from artists to businessmen – were likely attending the course and they wouldn't have needed a background in mathematics to be successful in their respective lines of work.

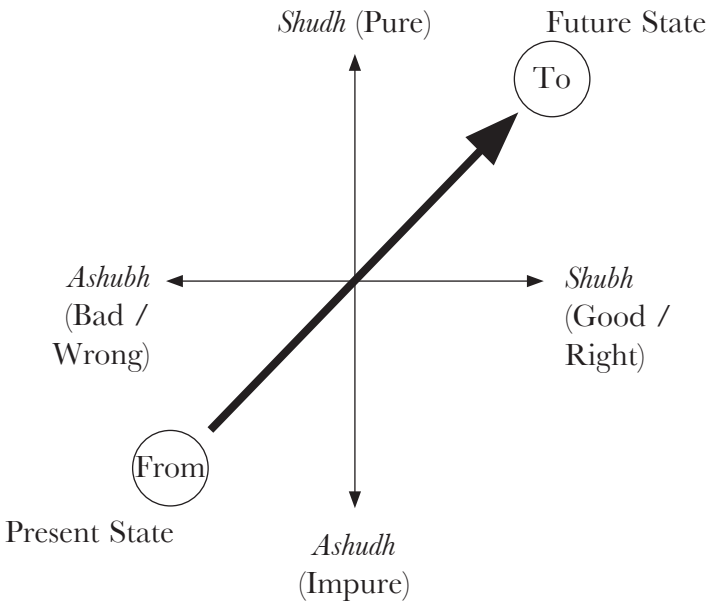
*Acharyaji* went on to explain that I was moving along the horizontal axis of *ashubh* (bad and wrong) versus *shubh* (good and right), which was a sign of progress. He then described the orthogonal axis of *shudh* (impure) versus *ashudh* (pure), along which I also needed to embark upon journeying from the bottom upwards. It was a very simple and powerful framing for an important and relevant juncture of where I was and what I needed to move towards in order to be

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continuously equanimous and happy.

I had drawn countless 2 x 2 diagrams for my clients and explained how they needed to avoid the lower left quadrant and figure out ways to move into the upper right. It was time I understood the 2 x 2 that was going to help me resolve the fundamental issues of my own life.

It was clear that these two were orthogonal axes and *Acharyaji* had used the perfect framework for this mathematically-inclined business consultant to expound on a key concept. I was tempted to ask about his educational background but decided to stay on course with my questions and also not to take the liberty of enquiring about my respected teacher's credentials, who was well into his eighties.



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I asked again about not wanting to give up my drive to achieve big goals in life. He explained that I absolutely shouldn't give up my dreams and must persist with my chosen line of work and truly excel at it. He gave me his own example of coming from a middle-class family in rural Gujarat and building a decent-sized business with his own efforts, enough to afford a comfortable bungalow in Juhu, one of the most desirable addresses in Mumbai. I felt somewhat reassured that the learnings of *Vipassana* could be applied within the existing framework of my life and work.

He could sense there was more behind my question and went on to say that what's important is to not get anxious or upset when we don't achieve our goals exactly as we expected or wanted them to play out, nor get attached to specific outcomes because that's what we wanted versus thinking more holistically about what we might learn when things don't turn out as planned.

He further emphasised the importance of being reflective and remaining equanimous when things don't go our way and not to blame ourselves or others. Most importantly, he stressed that we not mistreat or disrespect others when there is an unexpectedly unfavourable turn of events. He also clarified that *kriya* (action) is completely different from *pratikriya* (reaction) and *Vipassana* teaches and enables us not to react in a harmful manner towards ourselves or others.

It felt like I had been living my life thus far like an inanimate object subject to the laws of Newtonian physics. The third law of motion states, "Every action has an equal and opposite reaction". The physics of feelings and emotions was slowly beginning to crystallise in my mind. I could see



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three possibilities in the case of human emotionality when encountered with a stimulus (or action):

1. Respond with a proportional or disproportional reaction (typical for most)
2. Do not respond with any action and remain equanimous
3. A further step, if we manage to remain equanimous, is to respond to any action with compassion.

It seemed that *Acharyaji* could tell that some mental jigsaw puzzle piece must have fit perfectly somewhere in my mind. He went on to say that now that I had understood the practice with which I could rid myself from the *vikaars* (i.e., negative emotions like anger, fear, lust, greed, dishonesty etc.) in my life, it was time to also turn my attention to address some of my *vichaars* (underlying core beliefs, perspectives, guiding principles, and values). This is what would help me recondition my mind away from the sensitivities to which I had been a reactive and Pavlovian victim for most of my life.

I turned next to the practical question of maintaining an active sporting interest in playing squash, stemming from the fact that we had been restricted to a maximum physical activity of brisk walks while we were at the camp. *Acharyaji* explained that the restriction on physical activity was simply to minimise distractions during the intense learning for the ten days and partly because the camp didn't have proper workout facilities.

He cheerfully encouraged me to maintain my active lifestyle and said that I might even notice an improvement

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in my squash game! It made sense because I had seen such a step change in my general mind-body coordination, which was clearly an essential ingredient in the sport that is often described as physical chess to the uninitiated. As I thought about my improved memory recall function aside from the mind-body coordination, it also struck me that continuing meditation might also help me pick up Mandarin even faster now through the regular lessons I was taking to learn the language.

Another student had arrived late for the official Q&A time and was now negotiating with the *dharmasevak* to get a few minutes with *Acharyaji* before the 1 pm meditation session commenced in a few minutes. I still had a few more outstanding questions on my docket but uncharacteristically and surprisingly selflessly, I offered to leave and seek more time later even though I had been allotted private time until 1 pm. I was grateful for having been blessed with so many clarifications in one conversation and prepared to excuse myself.

*Acharyaji* wrote his email address on a small the paper slip. Handing it to me, he said that I could write to him anytime with questions and promised to make more time for us to talk further before the course was over. As I was leaving, he emphasised the importance of reading about *Vipassana* and *Dhamma* in order to maintain the intellectual learning process for the conscious mind to serve as reinforcement for the unconscious mind, which was under training through the meditative process. Aside from my delight that *Acharyaji* had taken enough interest to offer to stay in touch after the course, I was impressed that our octogenarian teacher was

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fluently email savvy.

I dedicated the rest of the afternoon to meditating as continuously as possible so as to draw maximum benefit from the last couple of days of silent meditation. I started enjoying my sittings so much that I was almost finding the meditative hours to be more blissful and natural than the consciously awake moments of the day. Fortunately, I had instinctively been following *Guruji*'s advice about attempting complete mindfulness even while conducting other daily activities for the last several days and noticed my awareness level about myself and my surroundings continued to rise.

I was in a euphoric mood during the tea-break and enjoying a nice stroll in the garden when I suddenly started feeling some nostalgia towards drinking. It had been over a week since the last delicious scotch on the rocks I had nursed after my friend's wedding ceremony. It was certainly unusual for me to not drink for such a long period of time, as either a social or a work engagement would create more frequent opportunities. Besides, I liked drinking, so would have naturally craved a drink (not in an alcohol withdrawal kind of way!) in less than a week.

As I dug further and more deeply into these uninvited thoughts, I uncovered that I wasn't missing alcohol itself, knowing how it wouldn't help with maintaining awareness of my mind. It was more the feelings I associated with drinking – the social interchange, the relaxed mood, time with friends, interesting conversation, the nice ambience in a fancy restaurant.

I realised that I had come to associate all these fun activities with the idea of drinking, as my mind was

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habituated to experiencing them together. My wife used to ask me in the past when I would insist on ordering a drink the minute we sat down at a restaurant for a meal, “How come you can’t have fun without a drink in your hand?” I was happy and eager to report back to her that now I could...

Later in the evening session, some principles of life and existence that had become self-evident to me thus far during the course started to fully crystallise in my mind. Parts of *Guruji’s* evening discourse provided more validation and framing for these findings.

### *1. Responding to cravings and aversions leads to negative emotions*

This is the most fundamental principle underpinning our existence. As soon as we decide to fulfill some desire (either to want something or to try and get rid of something), we get fixated on wanting to see things happen a certain (our) way. In order to do that, we generate some emotion that is rooted in an expectation to achieve a certain outcome.

As an example, even to swat a fly or mosquito that is bothering us, we need to feel at least a small amount of aversion (hatred or anger) towards the insect. Considering a material desire, if we expect to receive a certain performance bonus at the end of a work year, we generate a certain amount (however small) of anticipatory greed in us. We can’t help but expect some reciprocation when we shower affection in a romantic manner. One can work through the same logic for anything where we become fixated around a certain expectation, outcome or desire.

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### 2. *Happiness (or Anxiety) = Reality – Expectation (or Desire)*

Happiness is the difference between what we observe or experience in the real world minus what we build up in anticipation as the expected outcome. From personal experience, we know that our feelings about even the smallest thing depend on the expectation we had at the outset. We often find ourselves somewhat let down when a movie, book or restaurant has been over-hyped by a friend and our experience doesn't support the high expectations we had going in.

It computes, therefore, that the lower our expectations, the higher the chances that we will be happy with the reality we experience. On the contrary, very high expectations that are met with average (or lower) real life experience lead to negative happiness or anxiety – imagine a well deserved and long planned vacation being disrupted by unexpected unfavourable weather or other travel delays.

### 3. *Reality (or all life processes) are transient and impermanent*

No matter how short or long the life cycle, all things and animate beings in the universe are impermanent. All events are transient and are always in the course of either arising or ebbing away. It is an illusion to believe that *anything whatsoever* is permanent. Fame, wealth, health, relationships are all in the process of changing or evolving and are impermanent.

No matter how confident (or hopeful) we are of something staying the way it is, it's simply in its very nature to change. The universe is designed with this one intrinsic

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characteristic of all things, beings, thoughts, emotions and events. Even how we feel about something – good or bad – is transient.

### 4. *Objectively observing reality leads to equanimity*

The only way to save ourselves from vacillating between cycles of happiness and unhappiness, driven by things going our way (or not), is to observe reality in an objective manner. That is, to experience everything with the knowledge that, regardless of our preferential bias, it is impermanent.

If we are genuinely and inherently aware and appreciative of this fundamental notion of impermanency, it will be easy to appreciate how futile it is to be attached to our preferred outcomes about life's events. Maintaining ongoing awareness about the law of impermanence in every situation will enable a continuous state of equanimity. Favourable and unfavourable outcomes will both increasingly feel neutral.

### 5. *Experiencing reality subjectively leads to anxiety*

Conversely to the law of maintaining equanimity through objective observation of a transient reality, if we attach our subjective view to the reality *we* desire, we receive an immediate dose of anxiety. This is true of the smallest things, from a traffic jam leading to a delayed appointment to bigger ones like wanting longingly and unsuccessfully to have children or grandchildren. The moment we avert or crave something, someone or a particular sensation, we are left feeling anxious about that situation from the inside.

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### 6. *Negative thoughts and emotions cause and magnify anxiety*

Engendering a negative thought drives an immediate anxiety response and sustaining it through negative emotions leads to a magnification in anxiety. This is a corollary to experiencing reality subjectively. Per the first law, once we fixate around a certain expectation (or outcome) from a situation, person, or event, a negative emotion (however small) gets triggered. This leads to a feeling of anxiety in order to achieve that outcome. An agitated mind will continue to harbour these thoughts and emotions until its desired objective is accomplished. In the intervening time, the sustained negative feelings will magnify the level of anxiety.

Consider the instance when you are waiting to hear about the outcome of an interview for a job that you desperately want. The longer you wait to hear back from the recruiter, the more anxious you feel about potentially not receiving the offer to join the organisation. The same is true for every other life situation. If you continue to crave or avoid a certain outcome (root cause of negative emotions), you continue to remain anxious.

### 7. *An anxious person makes others anxious*

Anxiety has a tendency to multiply in an exponential manner and can never be contained indefinitely inside the person feeling anxious.

My assistant related to this well and had once observed that whenever one of the other assistants slammed down the phone at her desk because she'd just had a stressful exchange with her boss, everyone in that office area went

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quiet and the entire atmosphere became tense. Interestingly, the troubled assistant hadn't often said a word to anyone else about why she was upset but the unnamed anxiety was transmitted successfully to the three or four other assistants seated nearby.

My leadership coach used to say, "Anxiety has a way of leaking out toxically," and "It's the job of leaders to contain their anxiety internally". How about figuring out a way of not letting anxiety arise in the first place and clip its genesis at the source?

### *8. Onset of anxiety is always accompanied with some physiological response*

The good news is that any time anxiety is generated in us, it is always accompanied with a change (however small) in our bodily functioning, providing us with a leading (and sometimes a lagging) indicator that we are about to fall prey to our own cravings or aversions.

Regardless of any other change being perceived or not, there is always an impact on our breathing. Our breath will change from its normal unnoticeable frequency and nature at the onset of any form of anxiety; it might quicken, or slow down, or it might become heavier or irregular.

From personal experience I knew that my breathing quickened when I got upset, became heavier when I tensed up, was irregular when I was afraid, and so on. Often, if we notice closely, other sensations like sweating, twitching, palpitations, changes in heartbeat and pulse rate also occur in response to and in concert with anxiety arising from different emotions.



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### 9. *Anxiety compounds by craving or averting these bodily sensations*

As we experience anxiety and its physiological by-products, if we choose to avoid the seemingly unfavourable ones or crave the favourable ones, our anxiety either continues to rise in the moment or accumulates over time inside us in some sort of ‘anxiety reservoir’, which we sometimes talk about as worry.

### 10. *Removing anxiety at its source (or genesis) is only possible by remaining equanimous towards all sensations on our body*

It took me a while to deduce this final link for myself in the chain of logic. If it holds that acting to suppress or wanting to sustain a certain bodily sensation leads to growth or accumulation of anxiety, then inversely, maintaining a neutral observational stance about that sensation serves to mitigate (and eventually annihilate) that anxiety. Even the large bank-balance of anxiety we might have built up over the years through our typical responses can be depleted over time by not providing fertile ground for the onslaught of anxiety induced through continuous life circumstances.

While I might have known some version of a handful of these principles at an intellectual level, I certainly didn’t understand them with such clarity of thought as came through experiencing them over the past week and the introspection about various life events over the course of the last two decades.

When I struggled with testing the validity of any of

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these principles, I conducted either a real life experiment, a prospective thought experiment, or a retrospective post-mortem of events, and found no apparent flaw in the reasoning relative to my own self-observed experiences. I made a mental working list of confirmed hypotheses and promised to continue my experiments to validate (or refute) these laws of emotional physics when I returned to my day-to-day life.

Stepping back from my version of home grown principles of existence and universal laws of emotions, I thought it might appear on the surface that they advocate an approach to life that runs counter to the notion of 'being human'. After all, most of us typically associate being emotional with being human and the *Vipassana* meditation technique prescribes remaining equanimous regardless of situation or stimuli.

A deeper look revealed that *Vipassana* helps with combating negative primal tendencies like fear, anger, greed and envy, and I didn't think that I would particularly miss these emotions in my life. The difference I saw was that while I would continue to experience all the same ups and downs, compliments and insults, gains and losses, achievements and failures, I could now do so with a sense of equanimity and poise.

And I would be doing so not just superficially by pretending to appear calm on the outside with a storm brewing inside, as the conscious self can be trained to veil the anxiety, but actually strive to achieve a state of mind that enables equanimity from the inside. Furthermore, if and when I might arrive at this ongoing state of mind, the primary emotion that would be expressed towards others

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would be that of compassion, and I couldn't see much wrong with that either.

*Guruji's* discourses were becoming increasingly rich with nuances that explained the changes I was experiencing, or perhaps I was grasping more of the concepts he was expounding because I was more aware and attentive. Either way, the evening's discourse seemed to be tailor made to help reinforce through intellectual learning what I had intuited through meditative process over the course of the last 24 to 36 hours. *Guruji* often elucidated complex topics through analogies and they seemed to be getting better and better.

This particular one truly hit home. Imagine if a spark (or a lit match) comes at us in the form of an insult or misfortune. If we have a virtual 'fuel tank' inside us filled with combustible gasoline, it will ignite spontaneously and create a massive explosion which will destroy the person who carries the gas tank within as well as the ignitor (the other person, if relevant). This tank essentially represents the sum total of how we have dealt with difficult situations in the past or have trained and conditioned ourselves to act in such situations. Alternatively, if the same tank is filled with cold water, when the same spark comes at it, it serves to douse the ignitor and also remains cool and calm itself!

Same is true if we sow a hypothetical seed of negative emotions. The seed would turn into an entire tree at some point and bear fruits of its own, which fall onto the ground with seeds inside which grow into more trees and eventually forests of negative emotions. We need to keep these new seeds from the original tree from growing into new trees by not allowing them to fall onto fertile ground in order to

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keep our negative emotions from prospering in our mind.

The story of one of India's famous goddesses (*Kali*) serves as a great mythical illustration. One of her many forms is the angry slayer of countless demons. Legend has it that in her rage towards them, she killed her own husband, Shiva, and is shown with his body under her feet in several depictions. She has several hands in which she is holding many weapons, and is surrounded by countless demons. Her tongue is extended and is steeped red in blood.

She accidentally kills *Shiva* with the rage she generated within her to kill the demons, who had two chieftains symbolising *raagas* (cravings) and *dveshas* (aversions). Interestingly, as soon as she would slay one of the demons and his blood fell on the ground, new demons would take birth, with the same multiplying quality as the ones that were killed. Eventually, she realised that the only way to contain the army of demons was to not let their blood fall or stay on the ground.

In her desperation to avoid increasing the army of demons that she wanted to vanquish, she started to lick as much of their blood off the ground as she could and carried the extra blood in a pot, which is shown in one of her many hands. The story is symbolic of working through our own demons of cravings and aversions to achieve liberation from within. In a later mythical form, the same goddess (having overcome her demons) becomes the peaceful *Durga*, and is also referred to as *Tara*, which means the goddess who pulls others out of their misery.

*Guruji* next addressed the natural question that was arising in our minds, "So what do we do about our old and

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existing accumulation of negative emotions from our past, even as we continue to avoid cravings and aversions in our present and future through *Vipassana*?” It was the day for compelling analogies, so he proceeded to share one about body fuel to propound this subject.

If we were to fast for a day, our body would survive using a store of pre-existing resources. If we go without food for a week, we would still survive but weaken considerably. Now, if we continue starving for a month or longer, there will come a point where the body’s reserves will run out completely. The same applies to our store of old negative emotions.

The only way to rid ourselves of the repository is to not allow new cravings or aversions to arise and then we would slowly but surely eradicate all our pre-existing negative emotions as well. Only continuous and dedicated practice of *Vipassana* can enable this removal, as otherwise the accumulated base of negative emotions would continually draw us down like gravity.

*Gurujī* went on to explain that there are four types of people in the world:

1. Those who have been in the dark in the past and continue to remain so (either by choice or due to circumstances). They are ignorant and continue their blind followership of norms and rituals without seeking the truth.
2. Those who are moving from light towards darkness. These were fortunate enough to have a good past and (or) present but were gaining too much ego, pride, wealth, or fame and beginning to treat others

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in a despising or condescending way because they start believing that their approach or thinking was superior and expected others to follow their wishes. These people do not possess true knowledge or *pragya* (the truth which is discovered through self-experience).

3. A third category of people is those who were ignorant or unfortunate in the past but have now found *pragya* and are now on their path to salvation.
4. Finally, those who are fortunate to possess *pragya* and are now applying their stature and means to further themselves and others on the path of *Dhamma*.

There were certainly elements in the second category that had applied to me in the past, especially the part about thinking my approach was supreme and working to convince others about it. Having had a glimpse of *pragya* at the camp, I knew I had been living in an area of darkness as it pertained to having an inside-out understanding of life's fundamentals.

*Guruji* said it was unwise (or unlucky) to be in the first two categories. I was a good candidate to be in the third category and was now becoming motivated to soon move to the fourth one and start helping others with this fortunate self-discovery I had made. He explained that it was important (on this rare occasion) to be selfish about learning the truths of life so we could help ourselves as well as others.

*Guruji* narrated a story from the Buddha's lifetime when a businessman from another region (Magadha) who had

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benefited from *Vipassana* pleaded with Buddha to travel to his region and teach meditation to the locals there. Buddha agreed and asked him to look for a suitable location that would provide the right environment for learning. The perfect piece of land to set up the camp, story has it, was a large private leisure garden that belonged to a local prince. The merchant got an audience but the prince dismissed the prospect of selling the land out of hand, citing it as his personal recreation space.

The merchant insisted that the prince name a price, any price, so that he might be able to buy the chosen plot of land. Thinking to discourage the merchant from this improbable transaction, the prince said he would sell the land if the merchant would pay him enough gold coins to literally cover the entire parcel of land. The merchant agreed instantly without any hesitation! The prince was surprised, but had to agree to hold up his end of the bargain because the law of the land dictated that the seller had to part with his asset if the buyer agreed to paying the seller's named price.

The merchant went off and sold off all his assets for gold and started laying out the coins on the parcel of land. The prince had hoped that the merchant would not fulfill his commitment to pay with gold for a plot of land that was worth a lot less and was flabbergasted to see that the merchant was serious about the deal.

When the prince asked in complete astonishment about his willingness to overspend for that particular piece of land, the merchant smilingly explained that it was no ordinary land, and it was specially chosen to be the site for

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a *tapo bhumi* (meditation camp) where the Buddha himself was going to teach *Vipassana*. The merchant went on to say that it would be worth all the money he had (and even more), if even one person could benefit from the liberating meditation technique.

Witnessing the inspiration of the merchant, the prince agreed to waive the rest of the price beyond the gold with which the merchant had already paved the parcel of land. He encouraged the merchant to complete the project to build the *Vipassana* campsite, and stated that he would like to attend himself!

*Guruji* couldn't have explained my state of mind better than with this story. All I could think of at this point was how (not whether or when) I could help bring others I knew (family, friends, colleagues, anyone) to the doorstep of this learning so they could draw even a small amount of benefit from it.



Day 9

## Equanimous Mind



It was well past midnight and I was wide awake feeling no exhaustion or the need for sleep. I figured maybe a walk in the hallway might help induce some sleep. I stepped out and it was dark and quiet. All the other students were rightfully asleep in their rooms.

I went to the open corridor area thinking maybe I would step out for some fresh air but noticed the door to the garden area was bolted though not locked. I figured it wise not to unbolt it and create noise that might break the quiet of the night. Instead, I ventured into the dark dining hall, the door to which was open. I considered flicking the light on but again checked myself as it might also attract attention from others and perhaps cause a considerate *dharma sevak* to venture out from his room to see if everything was alright.

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Not wanting to cause any trouble, I quietly stepped inside the dark dining hall and immediately felt a huge rat leap across the floor within inches of my feet. I had an initial feeling of being startled but immediately processed the situation and started walking back towards my room calmly. In the past, I would have completely freaked out in a state of minor panic.

As soon as I stepped out of the dining hall, one of the large steel plates came crashing down as the rat went about its business looking for scraps of leftover food. Still unperturbed, I gently shut the dining hall door so the rat and the metallic music it was mixing wouldn't bother the sleeping meditators. Only a few days ago, the distant kitchen sounds trickling into the *Dhamma* Hall two floors away were causing enough agitation in me to distract me from meditating and now I didn't react to a discordant sound a few metres away in a dark and quiet night.

Slowly but perceptibly, my sensitivity towards light, sounds, and animals seemed to be diminishing as *Acharyaji* had predicted. I came back to my room and lay down on the bed, looking at the ceiling with a huge smile on my face. I knew these sorts of things would have completely startled me in the past and I would always wish that I could be inherently less sensitive to them and maintain my composure when surprised unexpectedly. Finally, there was a glimmer of possibility and knowledge of a technique that might also help reset my internal thermostat for regulating such reflexes.

The 4 am gong now felt like a melodious chime that heralded the beginning of another opportune day to further

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cement the *Vipassana* learning. I was comfortably in my spot in the *Dhamma* Hall by 4:30 am and slowly attuned my mind to commence the meditative process. Walking in, I only spotted ten or so male students in the hall.

As on the previous day, after the part by part body surface scan, I started doing the external body full sweep free-flow using the deep and long *ujjai* breaths. I had realised even in previous sittings that my breathing was quite loud but didn't know any other way to conduct the full-body sweep, and thus carried on. Besides, I had been a relatively quiet meditator for the most part and this session was sparsely attended anyway, so I deemed that there was little risk of causing disturbance with my noisy breathing.

Within minutes of starting, I felt my cushion gently tugged from one corner and I opened my eyes to see one of the more formidable looking *dharma sevaks* kneeling nearby with his hands folded towards me in the *namaste* position. He gave me feedback about the sound I was creating with my deep breaths and the distraction it might be causing the other meditators.

I calmly explained that I was using the deep and long breaths to enable my mental flow for the full body scans and that I had taken approval from *Acharyaji* to use this respiratory support for achievement of the full sweep technique. He understood my approach to accomplishing *dharah pravah* (free-flow full-body scan) quickly and said that that was generally fine, but asked that I continue this variant of the technique without making any external sound.

Processing his feedback rapidly and fairly, I realised that he was absolutely right. I was confusing *long* breaths

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with *deep* breathing, which I had once learned as a different relaxation technique (*pranayama*). More importantly, I had reacted coolly to the whole episode. In a similar situation in the past, while I might have remained visibly calm given the surroundings, I would have certainly become defensive (possibly argumentative) and might even have considered saying something back about all the other sounds in the *Dhamma* Hall from various sources that were much more distracting. Instead, I reciprocated with folding my own hands to conclude the interchange and smilingly resumed my meditation with silent long breaths.

The process actually became more and more peaceful without the hard breathing and I started focusing on further finessing the free flow scans. Once I stopped the *ujjai* breaths, I found it easier to do consecutive body sweeps by doing free flow ‘cartwheels’. After completing the head to toes free flow going downwards, I found it harder to do the reverse sweep from the toes towards the head. Instead, it was easier to go from head to the toes and then ‘exit’ the body, do a circular arc outside with the mind’s energy as I exited from the toes and ‘re-enter’ at the top of the head. As I opened my eyes, having had a satisfying sitting, I realised that I had finally managed to perfectly clock an exact hour without any overt indication of time.

For the last several days, I had misestimated the overall sitting duration and was either over or more often under and had wanted to learn how to meditate for an exact hour without opening my eyes to check on the time. It’s difficult to estimate time completely unaided while trying to devote the mind’s full attention towards meditation!

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Over the last few sessions, I had noticed that I was often ten to fifteen minutes shy of the hour when I tried to guess if the full hour was over, and had therefore determined to push on a little longer from my initial estimate for an hour. I also developed a technique to break up the hour into smaller intervals and count those out more manageably and improve the overall accuracy of my estimate.

For some reason, my mother had always placed an emphasis on knowing and estimating time without the help of an aid like a wristwatch or wall clock when we were growing up. As such, I had a pretty accurate count of small time intervals, like five or ten minutes, often down to an error tolerance of 30 seconds or less. Using this as a foundation, I used my accurate estimation of five minutes to get up to intervals of 15 minutes and repeated the same process four times to estimate the full hour.

I then applied a cushion or correction factor to counter the 30 second error rate in each five minute interval. I knew I had to apply a positive correction because I had typically been short of the hour in recent sittings. Putting all this together, I had finally figured out how to count out an exact hour (to within one minute combined error tolerance) with my eyes closed in deep meditation. Satisfied with my analytical (and temporal) problem solving skills, I stepped out of the *Dhamma* Hall as a handful of other meditators were walking in to sit for the 5:30 am hour before breakfast.

During the morning group sitting, I purposely chose to work through some of the more daunting sets of personal and work-related issues I knew I would need to deal with when I got back to Singapore, to test if my learnings from the

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camp would benefit me practically in real life. One by one, each and every problem I could think of which had seemed unsolvable only a few days before I arrived at the camp, was coming into my grasp with lucid and elegant solutions emerging that I couldn't have conceived of earlier.

Not all the problems offered straightforward answers and the trickier ones required a little additional thought and nuance. I asked myself what was so different about how I was processing these problems now? Had I not considered a wide enough spectrum of solution space earlier? Clearly I had, but two things felt different now. One, I was no longer viewing the problems from *my* angle but from all the various perspectives in as objective a manner as possible. And I knew and could see that all the problems I was wrestling with stemmed from processes or situations that were clearly transient in nature.

These additional sets of perspectives allowed me to see things more clearly and in a simpler manner. I was arriving at the 'right' answer faster because the typical background voices in my mind "How would I feel about the outcome?" or "Is it a favourable outcome for me" were absent. I had come to the simple yet powerful conclusion, "When in doubt, do the right thing".

I remembered that Einstein had once said, "Problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them". I had discovered higher order mind processes that enabled me to resolve knotty and complex issues that my typical problem solving thought processes were unable to unlock.

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By this stage in the camp, every hour of meditation would yield so many different creative ideas (either for life problems I was working through or for my book writing plans) that I had to resort to using memory aids. So I would come up with phrases or sentences that included key words related to themes or stories for which I would need to jog my memory after the camp.

This morning, ideas were flooding in at an exceptionally accelerated pace so I had to construct one really long memory aid. “*Disabled Rat Apologises and Thanks for Breathing Feedback during Bhram Mahurat after Cold Shower and Lives Life to the Fullest in a Matter of Fact and Journalistic Manner*”. I was almost beginning to wish my mind would slow down so I wouldn’t miss an important key word!

After the group sitting in the morning, we received some detailed instructions and explanations from *Gurujī* through the cassette recorder. It seemed that there would be more discourse type of commentary as we were in the home stretch of the course, and it was important that we had as complete an understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the technique as possible before leaving. *Gurujī* summarised our experiments with the *Vipassana* technique thus far and classified them into the three types of overall experiences (*anubhūtis*):

1. Gross, solidified, intense or numbing sensations all over the body, or
2. Mix of gross and subtle sensations enabling partial free flow over the body, or
3. Subtle sensations everywhere allowing for an *en masse* free flow

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He reminded us that in all cases, all these different types of sensations that we encountered while meditating (pleasant or unpleasant) are also all transient (*anitya*), so we must not create feelings of either craving or aversion towards them. Even if we frequently experienced full free flow (similar to a bucket of water dropped over the head flowing to each part unaided and covering the entire body with subtle sensations), we must not think that this stage is commensurate with *nirvana* (self actualization) or *mukti* (complete liberation).

This current meditative experience we were having was not only *anitya*, but was also still being experienced in the sensory world using our five sense organs and the conscious mind. As such, there was still a long way to go in order to experience the ultimate truth, which lies far beyond the sensory world.

*Guruji* emphasised the importance of having the mindset that each of these three types of meditative experiences is an opportunity to rid ourselves of either or both types of *sankaras* (accumulated emotions) of cravings and aversions. When we experience gross sensations and choose to remain equanimous, we are slowly eradicating the aversion type of *sankaras*, and when we experience the subtle sensations, we begin eradicating the craving type by maintaining equanimity. The key is to work with a great deal of patience and sincerity keeping this in mind and not be disappointed when experiencing gross sensations or become attached (develop *aasakti*) towards the more pleasant and subtle ones.

After the group sitting in the afternoon, we received instructions for the next exercise. I thought we had travelled



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fairly high up the *Vipassana* learning curve, at least as high as one could go in the short span of a week to ten days, but *Gurujī* continued to up the ante with every passing day.

As a next stage in the practice (*abhyaas*), he encouraged those students who were able to do full-body sweeps back and forth from head to toes in free flow (*dharah pravah*) on the surface of the body, to ‘pierce’ through and ‘penetrate’ our body parts through the power of a mind that can concentrate its focus and energy sharply enough to ‘enter’ various organs either from one side and leave from another, or make a front to back, or back to front entry and exit. Once inside a given body part, much in the same way we had done at the surface, he instructed us to observe the sensations we were experiencing inside the body.

*Gurujī* instructed us not to focus on observing the size, shape, colour or matter of the internal organs but only on the sensations we could feel, maintaining equanimity in the same way as with the surface scans when gross sensations are encountered. One stage would come when we might even experience full free flow inside in the body (*bhang*), and realise that even on the inside, the entire body matter is essentially made of waves that bubble up and down or appear and disappear.

Even at this advanced stage, it was possible that some deep seated *sankaras* dislodge and start to appear either on the surface or inside in the form of gross sensations. We must realise that such experiences are not regressive, and are actually a sign of further progress as the most deeply seated *sankaras* can only be dissolved once we are experiencing general free flow throughout the entire body.

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I sat there listening and thinking that I had foreseen that a point might come during this course when I would truly run into an insurmountable hurdle of how much I could learn or what I could possibly do. I was amazed (and a little bummed) that there were further milestones in this journey, and a little surprised with myself that I hadn't guessed that this latest instruction might be the next natural evolutionary step in the meditative process. Never quitting without a valiant attempt, I promised at least to give this next challenge a decent shot. Having experienced my mind metamorphose in the last seven days, I didn't rule out the possibility that it might surprise me again.

Based on all the surface scans, I knew that the head was the place where I experienced the most sensations in general so the odds were highest I might be able to 'enter' into my head for this next exercise. However, the skull being the hardest portion of the body, I wondered whether to try a softer cartilage item like the nose or ear instead to maximise my chances of success. I tried from the front and my mind's concentration spread on my forehead much like a paint ball smears on a brick wall upon making impact with its surface.

My mind's concentration also dissipated as I tried to enter from the top through the crown of my head. *Guruji* hadn't offered the top to bottom (or bottom to top) entry possibility probably because that wouldn't apply to most organs, but I figured it was an even bet relative to the other entry options, at least for the head, which was like a three dimensional peninsula. This time my concentration melted like hot chocolate fudge spreading over a dollop of cold ice cream.

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With greater resolve (and some measure of desperation), I made the side entry attempt inwards from my left temple. I felt while most of the concentration energy fizzled away as in the previous two attempts, a small fraction of it had penetrated, as if the gushing jet of water had found a small fissure in the dam and a trickle made it through a willing spot in my left temple area.

I knew that with calm persistence, I could turn the trickle into a small stream and eventually take down the formidable dam. I decided to focus the rest of the session on channeling my mind's concentration into this one task of mentally 'entering' the cranial chamber and rationalised that I would practice the full body sweeps another time.

Like the karate kid learning to break a brick with his bare hands with repeated attempts, I finally broke through with the fullest pounds per square inch of my mind's energy and found myself swimming inside my own head. I didn't have to try hard to identify what sensation I was experiencing inside my upper skull cavity because it felt like I had voluntarily decided to jump into a bed of molten volcanic lava. I realised my breath and pulse had quickened considerably and my forehead was flushed with huge beads of sweat even as I could feel the cool air conditioning in the *Dhamma Hall*.

*Guruji's anicca* chanting (signaling the end of the session) came and went and the students were given the customary break but I sat motionless and powerless. I finally told myself to exit the skull but found it hard to do so, as if the mind knew there was a lot more to uncover there and didn't want to retreat so quickly from its maiden voyage into the depths

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of my consciousness. Eventually, I came out of this intense sitting and went straight to *Acharyaji* to describe and discuss what I had just experienced.

I indicated that I wanted to talk about the technique to ‘penetrate’ body parts and *Acharyaji* asked, “Tell me what do you want to know?” I told him that I had tried many body parts but only managed an entry into the head, and that too only from the side. I could see the look of slight disbelief on him as he asked, “And what sensation did you experience once you were in there?” I said it felt as though I had jumped inside an active volcano and he smiled with astonishment and said, “That is correct. Our brain gets heated up because of all the mental activity, much like a computer’s processing unit!”

He went on to explain that this was why some Indian sages would smear their foreheads with a sandalwood paste to keep their heads cool when meditating, as sandal was the coolest naturally available substance, in olden times. I think this moment was the real turning point when I forged a strong bond with *Acharyaji*. I left wiping the sweat from my forehead and went and washed my face with cold water.

Upon reflection, it did make sense that the likely sensation inside the head would be that of heat but when I was struggling to make an angular entry that might work, the last thing I could think of at that time was what sensation I should be expecting once I got inside. I was only thinking about whether I might get in with my amateurish meditative attempts.

I was both relieved and also encouraged that I had progressed enough to tackle a seemingly advanced step in

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the journey, which hopefully meant that it might further strengthen my resolve to continue practicing and also to unleash further greater benefits, if that was even possible.

At this stage, I was now completely convinced that I would continue to put in every effort humanly possible to maintain the meditative practice when I got back to my regular life. The significant step changes in my energy level, concentration power, attention span, creativity, mind-body coordination, temperament, and numerous other faculties I had experienced through the use of this technique were palpable, especially when I didn't even know that such a big delta was available as headroom for improvement.

I had also unlocked several previous paradoxes and exploded enough myths that I knew it would be wise to continue the practice. I had seen new means and possibilities open up that I would have otherwise considered unimaginable. I also knew that this practice wouldn't take time away from my work and personal life. On the contrary, it would clearly enhance my relationships and make me more productive and effective in all aspects of my life.

What I really wanted to do was to build greater awareness about this invaluable technique, for which I wanted to write extensively. I could see how my wife might struggle with how I was going to make time to do so in my already packed life, both at home and at work, together with my various hobbies and social interests.

Looking back throughout my life, I had always had something else going on parallel with essential core activities during each phase of my life, and I reflected on how a path always appears to allow juggling of multiple things without

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compromising the primary focus.

At work, I could absolutely see how I would create so much more meaningful mindshare through my improved ability to focus with an increase in attention span coupled with a leadership approach to truly empower others and only manage results. At home, I could see that my wife would find me more pleasant to be around and would draw more out of interactions with me. At a more basic level, regardless of whether others would experience and perceive me differently, I would simply have more mental and physical capacity because I had noted the inverse correlation between sleep and meditation.

With the increased energy level and comfortably longer waking hours, I could do a lot more with my day. I never thought I could meditate all day and plan out two separate books over the course of ten days, and had witnessed that it was possible! What I could do with weeks, months, and years seemed boundless. I now knew how some of the world's greatest leaders who I have admired managed to make time to write and accept speaking assignments not only post retirement, but also while actively holding a significantly time-consuming office, and also balancing their family life.

Frankly, in some ways, this other aspect of life – following on the path of *Dhamma* and awakening an interest in it in others – would also serve to bring better balance in my own life. While satisfactorily successful at many levels, it had become too monolithic and mundane and it was time to up-step it.

One of my mentors had said to me over a year ago

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that I was approaching a stage in my career when I would need to figure out a way to ‘triple my RPM’ (revolutions per minute, commonly used to indicate the frequency of rotation of a mechanical component, such as a wheel, around a fixed axis), meaning find ways to enhance my productivity in order to take on more responsibilities in the future without affecting the quality of my work or diminishing my lifestyle. Learning *Vipassana* was showing me how I might increase my RPM ten times or possibly even more, while also becoming more peaceful from the inside!

To say that this meditation course had been a watershed event in my life would be a gross understatement and I wanted to find a way to express my gratitude to everyone and to every circumstance that had led me to the doorstep of this learning opportunity. Clearly, I had lived a somewhat misguided life thus far to benefit as much from this meditative technique as I did, but there was a lot of fortune involved in how I stumbled upon it this early in my life’s journey.

The afternoon group sitting was accompanied with some more detailed explanation and instructions. *Guruji* described that we would eventually (either during the camp or sometime in the future) head towards a state of total self-dissolution (*bhanga*) while in the meditative state. Once in this state, we would even manage to penetrate inside the spinal cord and feel subtle sensations there as well and conclude that our entire body is composed of dissolvable matter.

Once truly and consistently at this further advanced stage, we should ask ourselves whether both our mind and body have become supple with subtle vibrations everywhere. If so, he advised us to conduct infrequent spot-checks by

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taking the mind to a certain spot or body part (about one fingertip diameter in size) and observe what we experienced. The test would be successful if we register some sensation immediately and it stays localised to that very spot and does not become diffused.

If this checks out, together with entry into the spinal cord also producing subtle vibrations, we would then know that we are clearly at the *bhang* stage. I focused my effort in the session to consistently penetrate the head, and slowly the face and neck region, but couldn't get any further.

The sitting itself was swift and effortless. It was the first time I completely lost track of time and was somewhat surprised how quickly the *anicca shloka* started playing to alert us that we were nearing the full hour. I immediately reasoned that I had felt unable to track time because I could no longer focus on the past while meditating, which is what we need to do in order to count out time!

Later during the evening walk post tea-time I witnessed (perhaps just in my own mind) a sense of anticipatory excitement in everyone's gait, perhaps thinking about the day ahead when we would all be able to talk to each other. I found it amazing that I now had a new sense of awareness that allowed me to pick up such subtleties even when no one had said a word.

It proved to me what I had heard from a body language expert who had explained to me once that the majority of communication happens non-verbally. Ralph Waldo Emerson summed it precisely, saying "Who you are (or what you do) speaks so loudly I can't hear what you are saying".



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The 6 pm session turned out to be the most surreal experience I'd had thus far, which I suppose was befitting for the last session before the noble silence was broken. I had been meditating for a total of over six hours on the same leg and wasn't feeling any pain. During the session, I explored every nook and cranny inside my skull and face. It seemed as if my eyeballs and tongue were roaming around following in tandem with my mind as it went about its explorative journey. It sort of made sense that the mobile sense organs were tracking in the direction in which I was trying to move my concentration.

Coming out of this session, I felt that my head was disjointed from the rest of my body as if it was separately suspended in air. I still experienced a fair bit of heaviness and heat on the inside of my head. Explorations into the core of the spine and other body parts continued with slow yet steady progress.

*Gurujī's* evening discourse focused further on the practical application and utility of *Vipassana*. He worked through anger management as an example. He demonstrated how we often associate our anger (or irritation) to sources that are external to us – stimuli such as other people, triggers, or situations – and keep thinking that if we could remove or modify the unfavourable stimulus, our anger would dissipate and we would be happy.

He went on to highlight the immaturity in thinking that happiness can come from avoiding or changing the circumstances that are unfavourable towards us because more and more such situations are likely to keep arising even if we successfully deal with a handful of them.

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Even if we train our conscious mind to stay calm in anger-inducing situations using techniques like counting to ten, drinking a glass of water, removing ourselves from the situation, the actual thoughts of rage continue to seethe within us and accumulate inside like dormant volcanoes. The same holds true for fear, greed, envy, hatred, lust and other negative emotions.

These volcanoes, while seemingly quiet and benign, can boil over and burst open any time due to a trigger event and explode in a highly destructive manner because we haven't really tackled the issue inside us at the root cause level. Despite our attempts to enable the conscious mind to not fall prey to the negative consequences of these emotions, our unconscious mind continues to crave or avert the various stimuli and overpower the conscious mind in its weak moments.

If we break down an anger-inducing situation in real life, we first realise that the person who caused the hurt (or wronged us) did their part and has probably moved on to something else while we are the ones stuck dealing with it. I could completely relate, given how I have felt when I have ruminated for hours on countless occasions over an unpleasant email from a colleague.

We must come to realise that how we act in response to the arousal of anger (which is real and cannot always be avoided) is at least partly (if not fully) in our control. How we react dictates whether we feel anxious or not, per the laws of emotional physics. The key to how we feel is in our hands, not with the aggressor or the anger-inducing trigger event. Through the practice of *Vipassana*, we can continue to test

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the validity of this logic through observational experiments on our own body.

The same is true even for situations that extend over longer periods of time. Take for instance a disputed property for which you are taking legal action to have the matter resolved. You know deep down that you are in the right and the other party is in the wrong, yet you continue to remain anxious and continuously hurl silent yet potent expletives at the other party.

The case continues to drag on for years, from one court to another, from lower to higher jurisdictions and is finally sorted out in your favour through the highest tribunal after a full seven years, during which you remained very anxious. Now, the outcome was always destined to be in your favour but you *chose* to remain upset with the situation for the entire duration.

As *Guruji* was narrating the story, I couldn't help but relate to the situation I was in with an Indian real-estate developer, in which a sizable chunk of change was held up because they abandoned a condominium project and the case was still dragging along in various courts. I had finally and totally let this go a few days back earlier during the camp but realised how in an exactly similar fashion I had remained anxious even though I knew I was the wronged party and eventually the legal authorities would rule in my favour.

After processing situation upon situation through the logic and first-hand experience of impermanency, I arrived at the conclusion that the choice to become anxious about life situations was completely and solely in my own hands.

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*Guruji* turned next to explain the notion of how a sense of ego or image gets created. We all create an image of ourselves and of others (based on limited and biased data) that we then fixate on and continue to build up in our minds. We selectively process additional data to further embellish this image that we hold in our minds.

We spend inordinate amounts of energy to convince the whole world that our conception of our (or others') image is the most accurate and relevant representation based on the characteristics we desire (in our own case) and anecdotal or sporadic evidence (in the case of others). The moment anyone says or does something to challenge that image, we lose our balance and self-control and feel compelled to counter such an ego attack (either on us or those who we hold in high esteem), sometimes with considerable ferocity.

After the discourse was over, I thought how fortunate it was for us to be learning the same technique that Siddhartha Gautama used to achieve complete enlightenment and ultimate liberation to become the Buddha. *Guruji* joked again that becoming enlightened wasn't Gautama's monopoly and that Buddha had wanted all humans to walk the path of *Dhamma*. We all knew at some level that Siddhartha Gautama had become the Buddha through introspection, and it was a great feeling to learn his technique for self-actualisation.

I had come to this camp thinking I would learn how to get some stress *relief* and was acquiring the knowledge to achieve stress *removal*. All my efforts working with leadership coaches seemed analogous to symptomatic control when there was a knowledge source that could enable me to remove the notion of stress and anxiety from an origination

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and root level! I had been caught in a world of quick-fixes when there was a deep-cleansing treatment available.

The discourse had been unusually long and *Acharyaji* only gave us a couple of minutes to come back for the instructions for the next day. *Guruji* instructed us to attempt an internal body version of the full sweep free flow and described the process being akin to a drop of ink falling into a glass of water and dissolving through the entire volume of it as it reaches the floor. I had barely managed to learn how to penetrate my head with the mind and we were on to scanning the whole body from the inside!

We also got some special instructions for the following day. The noble silence was to be broken at 10 am. We could talk to other students but not make any bodily contact (like shake hands) until the course was completely over on the morning of the eleventh day. Men and women could meet in the common corridors but not go into each other's sleeping quarters. I figured *Guruji* was slowly moving us from the operating room to intensive care and now towards rehabilitation before complete discharge.

I stole a few quick moments to approach *Acharyaji* and ask about the tandem movement of my eyes and tongue with the mind's focus when I had explored the insides of my skull during the previous session. He said that new students often reported that their closed eyes follow the movement of the mind as accustomed to doing so when they are open, but it was the first time he had heard about the tongue tracking to the mind's activity. In my view, the tongue was somehow also helping with the concentration process as it is our collective external sense organs and the brain that

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dictate how we experience our environment and sensations on the body.

Back in my room, I was greeted with the loud sounds of a band that had also been playing during the day time. I later found out that there was a theme park in the adjoining plot of land so there were shindigs and festivities all day. They were clearly having special celebrations and revelries as they continued to play music late into the night, this being the last one of the year. I noticed how the sounds from the band didn't seem as cacophonous as they had on the first day I arrived.

I smiled, thinking I couldn't have asked for a better end to the year (and decade!) and the ushering in of a new one. This last decade had been a fairly eventful one for me. It started with defending my PhD thesis and starting a new profession in 2001, getting married in 2002, being elected partner in 2009, and then recently moving across the world to Asia in 2010. What a way to culminate it with the *Vipassana* experience that had awakened me to the fundamental principles of life and existence in ten days!

I thought of how much importance I had placed on, and had felt so attached to, various things in my life like my career and how immaterial it all felt now that I had received a small yet powerful taste of what truly matters in life. This isn't to say my work would become less important after I concluded the program, but I knew that my actions henceforth would come from a sense of purpose but without a sense of attachment to particular outcomes.

Many other issues that I had chosen to magnify in my own mind, like what others think of me, also now seemed

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completely irrelevant. And all this had come into my consciousness from within through a technique of simply observing the sensations on my own body, understanding their impermanency and learning to experience them with an equanimous mind.





*Day 10*

## Tearful Liberation



I managed to clock an exact hour again during the pre-dawn sitting. During the session, in unsuccessfully trying the more complex penetration technique, I was beginning to wonder whether I was losing my grasp of the correct basic technique itself, but it all came right back as I reverted to the more basic surface scans. I realised through this hour of meditation that the key yardstick for measuring whether I was practicing *Vipassana* correctly is equanimity and not whether I could do free flowing full-body sweeps.

I had probably fallen prey overnight to some anxiety-inducing thoughts, which was why I was doubting my knowledge of using the technique the right way. One hour of *sadhna* (practice) cleared my head and reality dawned that life's universal principles always ring true.

A deeper realisation dawned on me after the reassuring

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hour of practice. It struck me that I had been in an overly euphoric and equanimous state for the last few days, which is why minor feelings of anxiety seemed like a hard landing. It was a real-life example of the fact that the source of *dukkha* (misery) isn't experiencing the euphoria, but it is the expectation that such a state of mind should continue permanently. As such, this morning's session was an important instruction in equanimity – if you enjoy something, do so in an equanimous way so you don't grieve when it ebbs away (like everything else does), which is in its inherent nature.

In a nutshell, my overall insight on the process was that through use of the *Vipassana* meditation technique, we are essentially learning to practice remaining in a state of equanimity and not cycling back and forth between overly euphoric and depressive states of the mind. And as with anything else, you get better at it the more you practice!

The key that *Guruji* highlighted continually is the importance of practicing the correct way, otherwise we wouldn't see any results and might risk being disappointed with our efforts, which could lead to the perpetuating vicious cycle of anxiety. Practicing the technique incorrectly is not very different from getting good at the wrong swing, which can then lead to frustration on the golf course despite the hours you put into it at the driving range.

I stepped out into the courtyard at 6 am and the morning chants (*bhajans and shlokas*) were streaming through in *Guruji's* voice "...*vaapis mudna na...peeche hatna na...*" ("...don't turn back...don't retreat back...") in the context of having taken courageous baby steps on the path of *Dhamma*. I thought it

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was an appropriate reinforcement for my state of mind as I geared up to return to my so-called normal life. Despite the irreversible changes I had experienced, it would be important to keep a strong resolve to stay the course when life's frequent vicissitudes kicked into high gear.

For four consecutive nights I'd had four hours of sleep or less. Under any other circumstances I would have bet that the only way I could have pulled something like this off while maintaining my sanity and productivity would be by taking steroids (literally, not metaphorically!).

Being a chronic asthmatic, if I went without a minimum of six (preferably seven) hours of sleep on even two consecutive nights, I would predictably have an asthma attack and could be down with it for several days, if not longer. As such, despite my demanding career with often long working hours, I have always had to optimise my workload to avoid being frequently gripped with asthma. I've had asthma since my early childhood, and steroids would usually be prescribed (whether in the form of an inhaler or orally), to control my condition.

Without any medical aid and knowing my constitution, four consecutive days of four hours of sleep would have wreaked havoc on my system and I would have probably evaporated in a hot air bubble laden with stress and asthma! I would have said it was completely nuts to imagine that I would willingly subject myself to such continuous sleep deprivation. And here I was – more productive than ever before, completely blissful and worry-free, feeling healthy vitality, compassion towards others, and a seemingly infinite source of purposeful energy from the inside on less sleep in

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four days than I would usually have in two!

The New Years Eve party across from our campsite still continued well into the early hours of the morning and the sounds of the live band and the revelers were intermingled with *Guruji's* chants in the courtyard. This was probably the first New Year celebration I had spent alone. I reflected on the relevance of 'the party's over when the music stops' to my condition coming into the camp. I had lived for years in ignorance, reveling in the party of my unaware and indulgent consciousness.

The waning moon had moved further below the North Star in the morning sky. The Pagoda bells were chiming more briskly in the background as though with a greater sense of purpose than their leisurely pace from the previous evening. I like the new moon the most of all the other phases with its crisp outline, the slender shape, and the way it curves itself as if in a smile. The setting was like a moon chime playing in the morning sky.

As I sat down for a nourishing breakfast at 6:45 am, I felt my eyes moisten spontaneously and inexplicably. I couldn't quite tell if these were tears of gratitude and fortune for finding a better way of life or were from wonderment and shame over the years of ignorant living. I wiped the moisture from my eyes without drawing a lot of attention to myself and stepped out into the garden for my last morning walk at the camp, continuing to look for an explanation for the teary breakfast.

It was soon time to join the other students in the *Dhamma* Hall for the final group sitting before the noble silence was broken in a couple of hours. We had been advised that this

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sitting would be atypically longer, as we would be learning the final meditative technique called *metta bhavana* (compassionate loving) or *maitri* (friendship or companionship).

During this session, I came up with my own logic for why we go into the *samadhi* (the quiet statue state) and are required to keep our eyes shut, hands and feet in position, to meditate. It's sort of like creating a closed system as an engineer or a physicist might say in order to fully ensure the mind is able to reflect inwardly and not have any external interchanges (input and output) through the body. I had noticed that even my lips would slowly seal shut completely and found it hard to open my mouth when in a deeply meditative mode. Finding my own scientific rationale helped me appreciate the process even further.

I started reflecting on the ten days of intense meditation and how I had managed to practice something around-the-clock without any previous introduction to it. It reminded me a bit of my time at the Bridge Nationals in which I had participated a year previously in Washington D.C. At such major tournaments you played bridge all day, every day, in back-to-back sessions from morning until midnight.

Despite the frequency of sessions, you keep going back for more as if you can't ever have enough of a good thing, and your skill at the card game improves considerably in those intense ten days or so of continuous play. You start recognising card distribution patterns that only come from continuous play and start perfecting lines of play that you otherwise weren't fully adept at or naturally and consciously familiar with.

Everyone stretched their legs after the hour-long sitting

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and swiftly readjusted their postures to get ready for *metta bhavana*. *Guruji* explained that this meditative technique was also known as *punya vitarana* (or distributing good deeds) and began with summarising a little bit of what each student might have concluded by now.

1. “In my life, I have become anxious because of my own *vikaars* (negative emotions) and have realised that this is the true cause of my suffering.”
2. “Every time I became anxious, I also made everyone else around me anxious, which created a very tense atmosphere around me for others. Essentially, I made myself miserable and made everyone around me miserable as well.”

By this point in *Guruji*'s summary, tears were streaming down both my eyes uncontrollably and I tried hard to sob silently so as not to disturb other meditators. I now knew why my eyes were moist in the morning. I had realised deep down how I had unknowingly made the lives of many people – my wife, parents, in-laws, sister, friends and colleagues a living hell many times when I was under stress, for which I had misperceived *them* to be the cause.

I couldn't help but repent at how I had hurt others in my lifetime through my words and actions. Vivid images were flashing through my mind of how, in anxious moments, I had passed on the anxiety to others and also magnified my own anxiety level. I also realised that the source of all anxiety lies completely inside me and has absolutely nothing to do with anything or anyone external!

I gently kept wiping the tears off my face as *Guruji* continued.

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3. “I now know how to become happy and have tested the benefits of a truly happy life through first hand experience. I finally know how to break the cycle of painful suffering and misery.”
4. “Now that I know this, I want everyone else to draw benefit from this process and can’t contain the urge to pass it on to as many people as possible.”

It was as if *Guruji* was speaking on my behalf. It couldn’t be more true that I wanted the whole world to hear about my positively beneficial experience. I had been thinking of how to get the word out to as many people who would care to read or listen to my story. Even if only one other person drew a small amount of benefit from a similar experience, I felt my efforts would be worthwhile. How else could I ever repay even a small fraction of the unrepayable debt that had saved me from further misery and opened the door to blissful happiness?

With the summary complete and with my heart much lighter, *Guruji* turned to explain the details of the *metta bhavana* meditation. The technique is to spend a few minutes at the end of every sitting wishing for everyone’s wellbeing during the full body sweep free flows (*dharah pravah*). We could only apply the technique when two important conditions were in place:

1. We are physically not experiencing any gross sensations throughout the body.
2. We are mentally also not harbouring any harmful thoughts towards anyone.

Only with these conditions being fulfilled satisfactorily,

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could we express positive feelings for the benefit of others.

As *Guruji* wrapped up the instructions, I got into position to practice a few rounds of *dharah pravah* with the compassionate loving meditation technique. Reflecting on the essence of *metta*, I also made a mental note to thank all the people in my life who had been remarkably helpful to me, all the while strengthening my resolve to make amends with those I had offended.

After some practice with the new technique, we were instructed to leave the *Dhamma* Hall and permitted to speak with other students, but only after we came to the landing before the stairs after we had fully exited the meditation room, where silence must be maintained at all times.

I found myself walking down together with a fellow meditator who had appeared professorial from my observations over the days of the camp. As it turned out, he was a professor indeed and we had more than a few things in common: same engineering college, same hostel (dormitory) in the same college, both from Singapore, and both with an interest in teaching!

We started talking and began comparing notes on the experience. I didn't know whether to hold back or share fully what I had experienced and eventually couldn't contain my enthusiasm for going through this life-changing event. He explained how he had studied meditation and read a good deal about the process and its scientific basis before coming to the camp and had drawn benefit from it as well. We both concluded that we must continue the process after leaving the camp to sustain the benefits of *Vipassana*.

There was so much to talk about and so many other



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people to meet, especially those who were seated within a few spots of my location in the *Dhamma* Hall and the ones in my check-up group. I also wanted to call my loved ones, having verified that it was now okay to make phone calls outside the camp.

We were allowed to retrieve our valuable belongings and electronic devices as well. I brought my camp registration card from my room and started walking towards the corridor, which was like a busy street fair in a festive season buzzing with activity. People were meeting, greeting, paying off their laundry bills, retrieving their belongings and making phone calls.

I met several *dharma sevaks* who I had wanted to thank. I noticed that now their name-tags actually mentioned their names, which so far had blank slips in them but were there all along for students to be able to identify the serving volunteers easily. As when speaking with *Acharyaji* the previous day, I felt like I was thanking someone from the bottom of my heart, and expressing genuine gratitude.

These individuals had served selflessly and painstakingly with smiles on their faces, so that the students could have a comfortable and hassle-free experience while undergoing the intense learning. They were the caring nurses in the operating room, handing the scalpels and sutures while the surgeons conducted the complex procedure.

I managed to properly introduce myself to the *dharma sevak* who had facilitated my private appointment with *Acharyaji* a couple of days ago. He said that he had overheard parts of my discussion with *Acharyaji* and thus wanted to share some tips on maintaining a steady meditation practice

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in the real world based on his personal experience.

He started talking very passionately; his interest and compassion for wanting to help me stay on the path was palpable. It was my lucky day that someone I hardly knew wanted to go out of his way to impart friendly and important words of advice.

He started with saying that he attended his first course in the early nineties (having missed out on an earlier chance in the late eighties) and had done five or six courses ever since over the last two decades. He wanted me to learn from his experience and stay strong with the practice after the first course, which he hadn't managed to do and thus lost touch with the technique for a while.

I explained to him my typically crazy lifestyle, flying from one country to another almost everyday, 14 to 16 hour workdays, not to mention an extremely packed social and weekend calendar. He politely challenged my assumptions and framework for including meditation in my routine by asking benignly, "Why can't you meditate on your flights?" I hadn't considered the possibility because I had never even been able to sleep on a plane (even on long flights without some sleep-aid or an excessive dose of alcohol). To imagine finding a quiet and peaceful enough environment to meditate inside one seemed like an impossibility given my previous sensitivities to light and sound.

He insisted that an airplane could actually be the perfect environment – all I had to do was to get into the right frame of mind and start meditating! Having challenged and overcome several pre-existing biases and assumptions during the camp, my mind was certainly open to new possibilities

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and this seemed like a logical and promising one. As a matter of fact, inside an airplane I would be forced to stay put in one place without distractions like phone and email.

He persisted and said that I could even practice meditation in hotel rooms, which would be ideal because they are dark, isolated and often sound proof. Another preconceived notion came crashing down. I had always found it hard to be productive in hotel rooms because of feeling confined to a small and dull place. I would rarely even order room service when dining alone, and would go down to one of the hotel restaurants instead if I was too tired or it was too late to venture outside for a meal.

The man was spot on; a hotel room could optimally serve as a truly luxurious individual meditation cell. Now I started thinking how all the extra pillows always provided in nice hotels, as if to sleep a dozen people, might come in handy as a make-shift two-tiered cushion like the ones that were set up for us in the *Dhamma* Hall.

Furthermore, the *dharma sevak* insisted that I come back and attend another ten-day course within the next six to twelve months. Despite the clear and likely benefit, I knew this was highly unlikely given the work and personal life sacrifice a repeat commitment of ten days would involve. He went on to address the perplexed look on my face. “Have your wife sit and attend while you serve in the same course!” I continued to be impressed with his creativity and lateral thinking. I could see how that idea might actually fly with my wife.

Her initial thought to encourage me to attend had been that she would accompany me and serve (as a *dharma sevika*)

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in the same course. That plan had fallen through because she didn't have enough vacation available and the *Vipassana* foundation had also said that it had been too long (nearly five years) since her first ten-day course to qualify for *Dhamma* service.

It might be possible to entreat her to attend a future course to revive her practice while I kept her company as a *dharma sevak* on the same one. It certainly would be a fair ask because she had fallen out of touch with the technique and this would offer her a good refresher opportunity without us having to spend time away from each other. It was a long shot but certainly worth a try.

Eagerly latching on to every word the friendly *dharma sevak* was saying, I appreciated his final counsel to absolutely stay in touch with our *Acharyaji*, at least via email correspondence, once or twice a month for a minimum period of one year. He stressed that this was important both to receive continued positive reinforcement, as well as to ensure that I was practicing the correct meditation technique. It was easy to lose touch with certain nuances of the technique, which would lead to reduced benefits and serve as a further dampener to maintaining continuity of practice.

I thanked him profusely and marvelled at this *dharma sevak's* magnanimity and genuine interest in helping an unknown student and I resolved to return to the same camp some day, soon enough, to serve other students taking their first steps on the path of *Dhamma*.

It was nearly 11 am and I still hadn't joined the throng of people waiting to collect their belongings. I was

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probably the last one to grab my things. I pulled out my mobile phone to power it on. I had already asked my new friend from Singapore if I could use his phone to make a couple of calls, as I was doubtful mine would work since it hadn't when I had arrived in Mumbai. To my surprise, my phone was receiving full signal strength as if it too now found it acceptable for me to resume contact with the outside world.

My wife had to be the first one I would call – not only because that would be typical but especially because she was the reason and initial driving force behind my attending the camp. Her aunt answered when I called her at her parents' home in Pune and passed the phone to my wife. She asked, "So, how was it?" I spontaneously said, "I feel like I have been born again," without having concocted this dramatic statement for shock value. She remarked, "That good?" and I said I couldn't wait to tell her all about it when we met the next day after the camp was officially over.

I spoke with my father-in-law briefly to convey further driving directions so they might find the place easily when they drove down to the camp the following morning. I also asked him to bring along a ream of writing paper and said I would explain later.

Next, I called my parents' home. My mother answered and said she was expecting my call as she had learned that the noble silence at a *Vipassana* camp is broken one day before the course officially ends. I told her I was a different person and all my troubles and vexations were now a thing of the past, as if talking about a previous life or abstractly describing the life of another person.

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I told her how I thought she should make it a priority to attend *Vipassana* within the year. She replied that she could only attend a camp if my father was also to join her for the same one. I bid my mother goodbye and next called my dad, who was at work even on a Saturday.

After the initial pleasantries, my dad asked what I had decided about the flooring for the new house, given we had all been fussing over the choice before I went to the camp. I had reflected on this at some point during the last ten days and had no hesitation in saying that I would be comfortable with whatever everyone else wanted to go with. The line went silent with my dad's surprise that I no longer felt strongly about something I had cared so much about less than two weeks ago!

My only suggestion to him in response to something he had asked me a while back was that if they wanted to pick a name for our new home, I might recommend calling it *Samata* (equanimity). I clarified that this was simply a suggestion and I would be happy with whatever they decided regarding the name as well.

I signed off cheerfully and also made a brief case to him about sparing time to attend the course, knowing how much he could benefit from it given his intense lifestyle between a demanding career and additional workload of building a new house from the ground up.

As I walked back to my room to leave my laptop bag inside, I reflected on how a sense of secure equanimity felt so much better than insecure behaviour or agenda-driven orientation. I also realised how others value input from the equanimous so much more than views coming from a source

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of insecurity or hidden agenda.

It was remarkable that the less attached I felt to my views and interest, I could sense that others would care more about wanting to hear about what I had to contribute on a given topic. When I had told my dad they could choose anything they liked for the new floors, he had seemed more keen to want my viewpoint to be reflected in the final decision!

I went outside and noticed there was a temporary stall set up to sell books and other *Vipassana*-related paraphernalia. It was completely packed with students so I decided to stop back when it was a bit less crowded. My wife had told me that there would be the opportunity to make a voluntary donation at the end if I wanted to do so. I noticed a small desk with two gentlemen sitting quietly in a corner with a sign board ‘Donation’.

I sprung forward and sat down to make a payment. It was impossible to place a value on what I had received in the form of benefit. *Guruji*’s words had rung true once again that trying to estimate the costs of the room and board as a way to decide the amount of donation would cheapen the value of the course to a mere hotel stay.

The reason there was no fees assessed for the course was to ensure that students live like *bhikshus* and *bhikshunis* (or male and female ascetics) for the ten days, on charity from others, as that was an essential ingredient in lowering the ego, which would otherwise rear its ugly head and make evaluations like whether the lodging conditions at the camp were worth the cost assessed by the students.

So instead of valuing what I had received either as spiritual benefit or material provisions, I took the frame of

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making a continuous annual contribution that would provide for food and accommodation for future students. I decided to donate an amount that I felt good about and obtained information from the *Vipassana* foundation staff members on how to process it on an ongoing basis in coming years.

I knew that with my current professional life, it was easier for me to contribute funds than provide *Dhamma* service, which I intended to do in my own way by writing about and sharing my experiences with the world to build more awareness about the liberating technique.

I thought to myself that previous generations of students like me must have drawn similar benefits from the process to have felt the urge to pay their gift forward. It was also amazing how I had to search for the people to whom I could speak about making a donation, relative to my experience in other instances where I had felt pursued for contributions by charitable organisations in an awkwardly uncomfortable manner.

The dining hall had come alive with groups of students sitting together and chatting over lunch, which boasted a lot of special items as it was our final group meal at the camp. I was filled with so much bliss from within that for the first time in the ten days I felt as if I could go without eating one of the two precious meals of the day. I wanted to use the time to make sure I managed to greet all the various people I had thought about connecting with once the silence was broken.

I met one of the students who sat to my left in the *Dhamma* Hall. I had noted throughout that he was a particularly quiet and focused meditator and thanked him



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for being a great source of inspiration to me in the *Dhamma* Hall. Every time my resolve would weaken slightly during the initial *adhitthana* sittings, I would remind myself that he would surely be staying strong and had felt motivated to continue.

Next I saw one of the students from my check-up group who I had found to be a very simple and cheerful meditator and encouraged him to stay on the path as I made his acquaintance. I met another meditator who shared his story of the coincidence of how an ailing pet at home was the reason he had to cancel another planned vacation, which created a window of opportunity for him to come to the camp. We both rejoiced in how a series of fortunate incidents had led us to make the learning a possibility at this juncture in our lives.

I finally ate two cups of *raita* (salt and spice flavoured yoghurt) at 1 pm as the only food I consumed for lunch and managed to skip favourite delicacies like *gulab jamun* (condensed milk balls served in sugar syrup).

I had pre-arranged to see *Acharyaji* again as he had mentioned that there was a book he had wanted me to read that would provide some helpful thoughts on how to maintain the practice of *Vipassana* in a real world setting. We started with talking about how much the technique had benefitted me in the first ten-day course. Other students were also waiting to see him and I didn't want to take a disproportionate share of his time. He mentioned the book. His copy was at his residence in Mumbai and he said that he would be happy to pass it on to me if I could pay him a visit the next day.

## THE EQUANIMOUS MIND

I gratefully pocketed the paper slip on which he wrote his address and phone number and promised to try to meet at a designated time. I had to check first with my in-laws, as I was barely spending 12 hours with them after a year apart. It might seem a bit odd for me to use some of those precious hours to visit *Acharyaji*, in whose company I had technically been for the last ten days. I was hopeful that my father-in-law would understand, even though I thought my wife and mother-in-law might find it excessive and unnecessary to do so after already focusing on the same activity for ten long days, away from everyone.

Soon it was time for the afternoon sitting, which went by in a flash. After spending more concerted focus and effort to penetrate the skull area, when I stepped 'outside' to carry out a few full body free flow sweeps, I felt mildly jolted with an electric current and shook with its energy as it moved down from my head through the spine. Even though I had experienced biochemical changes earlier during the course, I couldn't fully explain the source of this discernible electromagnetic current. I took comfort from the fact that whatever its source or rationale, it seemed further proof that somehow I was continuing to register more evidence that my body was responding to the technique.

After the group sitting, *Guruji* provided more 'discharge instructions' as we were winding down our time in the 'recovery ward'. This to me was parallel to the last day of the camp when we could speak with fellow meditators, to slowly ease us back into our real life settings. Among other things, *Guruji* stressed the importance and value of *seva* (voluntary service) for several reasons.

## DAY 10 – TEARFUL LIBERATION

1. Foremost was the fact that serving other students of meditation was a form of *daana* (charitable donation). Just as other old students had served us, we could pay forward the gift of service to future generations of new students.
2. It was also a great way to stay in touch with the technique and continue our practice with fellow meditators in a group setting in the presence of a conducting teacher.
3. It offered an opportunity to experience the bliss that comes from seeing students leaving the camp with their faces glowing, having seen them arrive a few days earlier with stress, forlorn, and melancholy written all over them.
4. Finally, serving is somewhat like practicing in a semi real-life setting because even though the environment is quite controlled, dealing with issues relating to new students and helping with the camp's provisions can offer some real-world like challenges to test our equanimity.

I knew already that I really wanted to come back and serve though making time would be the tough part, not because of myself but because I wouldn't want to ask my wife to sacrifice time together given our precious vacation schedules. That's when the friendly *dharma sevak's* advice came to mind – I could come and serve if I could convince my wife to attend the same course.

*Gurujī* went on to say, as if reading my mind, that those who couldn't spare the full ten days to serve, can look into options to serve for a weekend, or even as little as one

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day, during an ongoing course if they so chose. Now I was definitely going to find a way to serve, as sparing a weekend is fairly manageable, and I knew I must come back to the same camp as it would also to bring back positive memories about this first experience.

Some of the *dharma sevaks* had arranged to bring the students next door to the Pagoda and I made it in the nick of time just as the group was leaving. The Pagoda, being a public attraction, was flooded with locals and tourists, and it took a little while for me to reacquaint myself with the din and bustle of regular life. We walked through a gallery of paintings that depicted various important events from the life of Gautama Buddha. It was inspiring to see visuals representing the stories that we had heard *Guruyi* recite during the evening discourses.

We were then directed towards the massive *Dhamma* Hall inside the Pagoda. I hadn't known all this time that the inside of the gigantic super-structure was simply a place for group meditation. Our tour guide *sevak* explained how the entire hall, large enough to accommodate over 10,000 people meditating together as a group, was built with a system of simple interlocking bricks without using any cement!

Apparently, when consulted to provide engineering expertise for the construction, engineers and professors from my esteemed technological institute had cautioned that such a large dome wouldn't be structurally sound without the use of cement. Yet the *Vipassana* foundation's engineering team had found a way to create adhesion using a very basic red limestone mixture, which is abundantly available in Western India.

## DAY 10 – TEARFUL LIBERATION

I was mesmerised with the idea of meditating simultaneously with so many other meditators and was finding it hard to quantify the collectively positive vibes such an exercise had the potential to generate having been overwhelmed with the effect of the technique just on one person.

I also found it striking that there wasn't a notion of a deity or God towards whom any chanting or prayer was directed. It was remarkably clear that the *Vipassana* technique wasn't beholden to a religious framework and was purely the science of self observations to enable learning to lead an aware and equanimous life.

I took pictures of the imposing building and with my buddies from the camp and walked back to the makeshift book stall in the courtyard, which was selling various items ranging from *Guruji's* discourse book summaries to CDs of the morning chants. I started piling up a huge heap of the items I wanted to bring back with me: ten copies of discourse summaries, two sets of DVDs with *Guruji's* evening discourses, multiple morning chant CDs, the life of Gautama Buddha in pictures, the revival of *Vipassana*, etc.

As I was lugging them back to my room, one of my new buddies quipped, "Looks like you are craving some books there!" I smiled and indicated to him that most of what I was buying was to share the learning with others – friends, colleagues and family. I purposely omitted to add that the other materials were to help facilitate any research I might need to do for my book writing.

I knew the harder customer to buy that story would be my wife, who wasn't a fan of my hoarding tendencies. I

## THE EQUANIMOUS MIND

figured that with my newfound equanimity, I could handle the situation without any conflict, and started moving around my personal things in my stroll-on bag to make space for more important items.

During my last evening walk at the camp, I noticed that some of the trees in the back were actually papaya, and saw one of the *sevaks* was checking to see which ones looked ripe. The source of the delectable fruit that I had finally developed a taste for was right there in the backyard of the compound and I marveled at the simplicity with which the food provisions were arranged at the camp. It was soon time for the evening snack before heading up to the *Dhamma* Hall for the final group sitting.

My thoughts were filled with nostalgia, gratitude and anticipation as I reflected on the last ten days and looked ahead to the ones to come. There couldn't have been a better way to start a new year and a new decade!

*Guruji*'s final discourse also seemed tailored towards what I was feeling from within. He summed up my feelings better than I could:

1. A sense of being reborn and a realisation that I was living life in *avidya* (which literally means the opposite of knowledge, or ignorance) and was born without the essential knowledge of how to lead a happy life.
2. Feeling two distinct things – no form of ego and immense gratitude towards others (I was experiencing both sentiments in overwhelming doses).
3. A heartfelt drive to share this gift with others (herein came the book I would write to share

## DAY 10 – TEARFUL LIBERATION

my experience with everyone and help those who I could influence to give this technique an opportunity).

4. A recognition of how I had been living my life with so many unnecessary and unfounded prejudices and biases.

*Guruji* had summed up my mental state with crystal clarity and I felt more gratitude as I appreciated the fact even more that I must have really gelled with the technique to be experiencing these sentiments in abundance. It was remarkable how differently I felt about everything that really matters in the span of a few days.

It became clear that I had lived my entire life thus far based on working tirelessly to meet expectations I perceived from the social systems around me, and from the people that were important in my work and personal life. Much like the cotton I had removed from my ears a few days back while meditating, the veil of ignorance had been lifted from my consciousness and I felt completely free and liberated knowing that my life would no longer be defined by the system around me or any expectations from others. And this wasn't to say I wouldn't care about and for others, but more that living my life as if to prove something to the world seemed like an unnecessary component to living a fulfilled life.

If anything, I now knew that I would live my life to the fullest potential and would be less regimented by external factors, which like everything else are also impermanent. I knew that my mind had stopped the unproductive cycle of vacillating between the past and the future or between

## *THE EQUANIMOUS MIND*

perceived negative and positive outcomes. It would only focus its energy on the present and assess all events as neutral and transitory, allowing it to remain perpetually equanimous.

While I wouldn't seek others' approval to live this new life, I would allow them to judge for themselves if they preferred experiencing me in my current state or were missing my old self. I knew from within that the answer to that would most certainly be that my new self was a step up from how they would have experienced me as in the past. I knew this would be true for my family, friends and colleagues.

I had heard a motivational speaker once say "If you live an exemplary life, an untold number of lives will be touched". At the time it had seemed mostly like a nice catch phrase, but I now understood what it really meant.

I spent the rest of the evening in the garden with my new professor friend with the backdrop of the lit-up Pagoda shimmering in gold with the evening bells chiming away. We talked at length about our experiences, life issues we had been dealing with and how things would be different as we made our way back to our day-to-day lives. Being in the same city, we promised to stay in touch and motivate each other to continue our meditative practice.



*Day 11*

## Reawakened Reality



I barely slept the two hours between 2:00 am and 4:00 am, mostly from the excitement leading up to the final session of the camp and the anticipation of seeing my wife after two weeks, of which the last ten days had been without any communication. We had been informed the last session would be a special discourse with final departing instructions and not the usual pre-dawn meditation.

*Guriji* started by saying that this last session was meant to recap the ten-day journey we had completed and took us through the highlights of the technique and the day-by-day learnings as we had experienced them. It was quite helpful to recall the various small steps from each day to see how far we had come in a short (yet long) ten days.

He explained that this entire course was actually a first baby step in itself in what must become a life-long journey

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towards enlightenment. He again stressed the importance of daily practice of an hour each in the morning and evening. As if reading our minds, he explained that if we practiced regularly, our sleep requirements would decline significantly and productivity at work and in other tasks would increase dramatically, so it would not be hard to create two extra hours in our hectic lives to meditate.

He predicted that there might be various obstacles in our practice when we returned to the real world, one of which might be criticism or skepticism from others. He advised us to avoid philosophical debate with others at this stage and rely on what we had actually experienced ourselves as the foundational basis and rationale for continuing our practice. At its most essential level, he suggested that we explain to those who enquire that *Vipassana* is a practice enabling a way of living that helps develop control over the mind and frees it from defilement, leading to general goodwill and compassion for others, which anyone would find hard to quibble with.

*Guruji* went on to say that on the first day we had been asked to surrender ourselves completely to the process and the teachings for the ten-day period. Now with the ten days completed, we were freed from that commitment and could judge for ourselves whether what we had experienced at the camp would be of value to us in our day-to-day lives.

Further, if there were aspects of the practice that we didn't like or fully appreciate just yet, he suggested we remove those components and continue practicing the rest of the technique. He cautioned us not to throw the baby out with the bathwater and draw zero benefit from the technique just

## DAY 11 – REAWAKENED REALITY

because there were a handful of things we didn't like about it.

*Gurujī* drew the analogy of a mother who prepares *kheer* (Indian rice pudding) with a lot of care and affection and serves out a portion in a bowl to her child. The little girl pushes the bowl aside, protesting that she would only enjoy the dessert in her *own* bowl. The mother tries to reason that the pudding would taste just the same but the child simply wouldn't budge. Unable to reason with the young one, the mother concedes and changes the container to the child's favourite one.

The girl digs out a spoonful and notices a small piece of cardamom in the pudding, which she has a distate for and doesn't want to consume. The mother explains that the spice adds more flavour to the dish but agrees to removing it in hoping that the child might find the pudding more palatable. Dissatisfied with the explanations and overwhelmed with all the things associated with the rice pudding that she doesn't like, the child refuses to eat it altogether.

*Gurujī* had found a really subtle and thoughtful way to convey the risk of dismissing *Vipassana* because it might seem unanchored in our pre-existing religious and philosophical beliefs. The fact was that no matter what platter you choose to serve it on, the technique would be equally beneficial. If there were aspects that seemed incongruent with our beliefs, we should remove those and try at least as much as we were comfortable with and draw some benefit from the technique.

In closing, he reminded us that the ultimate yardstick of the utility of this technique is whether we experience

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equanimity in practical aspects of our own life. Were we finding a better balance in our lives, especially in situations where in the past we would have become anxious?

*Guruji* encouraged us to find time to attend a ten-day course every year, and even explained how to go about setting up one at home if we didn't find an opportunity to travel to an established *Vipassana* centre. In parting, the only thing *Guruji* asked as *dakshina* (the payment to the teacher for knowledge acquired) was to send some *metta* (friendly vibes) his way while meditating!

I had planned to skip breakfast in the dining hall thinking I would probably eat with my wife and in-laws later in the morning. It was time to bid goodbye to new friends, the students and *dharma sevaks*. I stepped out into the courtyard and caught a glimpse of the morning sky with the moon's crescent fading but still visible below the North Star.

I exchanged phone numbers and email addresses with a few more people I wanted to stay in touch with, walked back to my room and dragged my stroll-on suitcase and laptop bag to the front corridor. I took a few pictures in and around the camp-site to keep the memories alive.

My wife and in-laws arrived right at 7:00 am and I took them around the campus to show them my room, the *Dhamma* Hall and the surroundings. Since they'd had an early start to the day as well, they were happy to enjoy breakfast in the dining hall itself. I introduced them to some of the people I had met. We were on our way out when one of the *dharma sevaks* I had become very close to came up to say goodbye. I hugged him tightly and both our eyes were

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moist with affection.

As we made our way towards the exit gate, I noticed *Acharyaji* sitting in the back seat of a minivan, apparently waiting for his driver to take him home. I took the opportunity to introduce my wife and in-laws to him. We agreed to visit him later in the afternoon to pick up the book he wanted to share with me.

As my family thanked *Acharyaji*, he remarked that he thought that I had a tendency to either be slightly left or right of centre, and that I still needed to balance my pendulum in the middle. My wife chuckled as we took his leave and said that *Acharyaji* had understood me well, even through the short set of interactions I'd had with him during the camp.

We drove away from the camp-site. I didn't know where to start when my wife asked how the experience at the camp had been for me. I must have talked for over two hours straight, explaining the day by day journey and all the biological and mental changes I had experienced.

My wife was quite intrigued because her particular experience at a similar camp in Massachusetts four years ago had been profound in its own way, but she didn't recall feeling some of the things I was describing. My father-in-law was a student of historic Indian texts and appreciated some of the nuanced explanations I put forth for what I had been experiencing.

I noticed as we drove to the nearby apartment guest-house where we were spending the night before returning to Singapore that for the first time in my life, the traffic and pollution in India didn't seem to bother me. The wailing

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siren-like horns from the local commuter buses were like the sound of music to my ears. I felt compassion for the aggressive drivers on the streets trying to muscle their way through the impossible traffic in serpentine fashion. I could relate to the anxiety they were experiencing inside and torturing themselves over circumstances they couldn't control.

After a few more hours of sharing stories from my ten days at *Vipassana*, we made our way to a nearby restaurant for lunch. My wife had wanted to treat her parents to a meal together to celebrate her recent job. My wife and in-laws, being vegetarian, would typically ask if I wanted to order some meat dishes separately and I usually would when we went out for a family meal.

The restaurant was Indian-style Chinese and they asked what I wanted to eat. I calmly told them to order whatever they liked and I would join them in eating vegetarian cuisine. Pleasantly surprised, they went about ordering the meal knowing that it was unlike me to not want to influence the food selection process or skip out on some of my favourite meat items. I ate very little and felt comfortably fed. Maybe for the first time in the 12 years we had known each other, I consumed less food than my wife during a meal!

Everyone else collapsed to catch a nap as soon as we got back to the apartment but I was feeling fresh and energetic despite my two-hour sleep the night before. Even though the four of us had planned to drive together to *Acharyaji's* house, seeing them all comfortably asleep, I decided to go alone and return before they awoke. I crossed the street and noticed a taxi stand where a line of eager drivers briefly haggled over who would drive me to Juhu Scheme.

## DAY 11 – REAWAKENED REALITY

I handed the instructions for the location over to the chosen driver and we made our way to *Acharyaji*'s house. I closed my eyes for a few minutes in the back seat of the taxi and the meditation process started spontaneously despite all the sounds outside and the bright sunlight. I was delighted to note that I was able to meditate in a creative setting like a car ride. Taxis and flights were a big part of my work week so it was comforting to know that I could meditate in such settings.

We made it to *Acharyaji*'s house in very good time. He had prepared a set of several reading materials he wanted to pass along to me. Explaining each item in some detail, he said matter-of-factly, "I usually don't get too involved with new students, but I was impressed with your work". He went on to say that it was good to see someone like me from the corporate world had taken a keen interest in *Vipassana*, and how I could become a good example for maintaining a normal business career while incorporating meditation into my life.

I wanted to stay a little longer and talk further but knew that my in-laws would also want me to spend as much time with them as possible, so I started to take my leave. I had wanted to touch *Acharyaji*'s feet throughout the camp but was bound by instruction not to make any physical contact during the ten-day course. Now I couldn't hold back my respect and affection, and touched his feet and asked his blessings.

I had asked the cab driver to wait knowing I wouldn't be very long, and he quickly doubled back to bring me to the apartment guest-house. The book *Acharyaji* had wanted

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to gift me with was the story of another meditator who had gone from one country to the other in search of the correct *Vipassana* technique and finally found it after a quest of several decades.

As I started flipping through the pages, I couldn't help but notice that my reading speed was considerably faster than what I had ever known it to be. Surely, I hadn't read anything in print for the last several days but I knew that a typical novel's page would take me a minute to read and now I was comprehending over two to three pages in a minute.

In the short 30-minute cab ride, I had read and fully understood five reasonably long chapters! I figured that this must be one of several enhancements in mental functioning that were the side benefits of a mind that is free of continuous mental chatter of positive or negative thoughts related to the past or future.

My father-in-law had made special arrangements to serve drinks for the evening very thoughtfully, as he knew my taste for fine scotch. I had anticipated this evening ritual and gently explained that I could no longer drink alcohol after uncovering for myself that intoxicating my senses led me further away from maintaining an aware and equanimous mind. Instead, we enjoyed a light cup of tea when I got back to the apartment and my wife wanted to repack some of our stuff to rebalance the suitcases we were carrying back home.

I thanked my father-in-law for the ream of paper he had brought for me and explained that I planned to write about my experience at the camp. Stealing a few moments



## *DAY 11 – REAWAKENED REALITY*

while everyone else was busy with other activities, I cleared some space on the dining table in the guest-house and sat down to write.

I noticed something interesting as I started writing. My right hand was flying off the paper as I tried to write, as if possessed with a power I had never known I had; words were coming to my mind faster than I could process them, and my writing speed was at least twice as fast as I had normally experienced.

It felt as if my hand-mind coordination had broken its sound barrier. I stretched out my hand in a starfish to see if it was still my own hand because it was behaving in a way that was completely foreign to me. I also noticed that my fingers and nails had a darker tinge of pink to them than I had ever seen before, certainly in recent years.

I first started making notes for my internal book and finished several chapters from my initial years in consulting. I remembered minute details from projects that were long over, names of clients and consultants I hadn't thought about in years, visuals of celebratory dinners and team events, what I had said, how I had felt, as if all those things had happened days and weeks, not years ago.

My hand was skipping off the page as I wrote phrases that sounded right in my first attempt to express a thought and didn't seem to need revisions or corrections. My right hand started hurting but my mind kept racing far ahead of my fingers and so I kept going. I must have written 50 to 60 pages worth of content in a couple of hours. This might be par for the course for gifted writers, but for me this was nothing short of completely unthinkable. I decided to take a break

## *THE EQUANIMOUS MIND*

from writing and resume it on my return flight to Singapore.

I made a few calls to friends and family in India as the day came to a close and we walked to a nearby restaurant for dinner. Although we were greeted with a 45-minute wait at the restaurant, I knew that my wife really wanted to eat at that particular joint. Under normal circumstances, I would have become annoyed with the delay and tried to persuade the hostess to seat us sooner, or made a case to my dining party to leave for another restaurant. I felt no urge to do either and was happy to peacefully wait our turn.

When we finally sat down, it was hard to draw any wait staff's attention to bring us water or take our order. Instead of feeling impatient or offended by their lack of customer service orientation as I would have in the past, all I could feel was a sense of empathy as I noticed how overworked the waiters seemed. I could have happily waited all evening for them to notice us but didn't have the heart to flag them down as they bustled from the kitchen to the tables to the payment counter.

After a satisfying dinner of pizza and salad, we walked back to the apartment. I finally realised that having been out of the camp and back in the bustling Mumbai metropolis, I had felt different all day; now I could accept India as a place where I could see myself being happy and comfortable. I had left my home country nearly 14 years ago for greener pastures overseas because I was convinced that I couldn't put up with the traffic, corruption, lack of infrastructure, and population explosion.

Even when I came back for holidays to visit family, I knew I could only handle India in small doses and would

## *DAY 11 – REAWAKENED REALITY*

do so only to meet loved ones who lived there. I had often wondered if I would voluntarily visit India if it weren't for the familial connections. I had occasionally contemplated returning either to care for my parents in their old age or to settle down after retirement, which in itself was a big question mark.

After all the years of a certain distaste for my native land as a place I could be professionally and personally satisfied, I now felt comfortable with the prospect of being in India. Digging deeper, I quickly unearthed that all the external circumstances and stimuli that had perturbed me in the past were still very much present, but I could now choose to remain equanimous instead of falling into the cycle of anxiety. I shared this revelation with my wife and in-laws who were amazed, having known my strong and unabashed views on the subject in the past.

My wife and I had even made a special trip to India a few years ago just for the purpose of assessing whether we might consider returning to and working in India. We had quickly beat a retreat after riding around the flooded streets of Bangalore (well after the rainy season was over) for a couple of days and having experienced how it can take longer to traverse the length of Mumbai than to drive from New York to Washington DC!

We had to start fairly early the following morning to make our 7:30 am international flight and everyone was keen to get a few precious hours of sleep. I had only managed to meditate for an hour all day, so as everyone returned to their respective sleeping rooms, I grabbed a small sofa cushion and found a comfortable sitting spot in our bedroom.

## *THE EQUANIMOUS MIND*

I closed my eyes to start meditating and soon the loud sounds from outside faded out as melodious background music and all I could feel were subtle vibrations all over my body...

## Epilogue

If I had heard the story chronicled in this book before directly experiencing the powerful benefits of *Vipassana* meditation, I would most likely have had a very hard time believing it. To a logical person, the likelihood of experiencing such a significant step change in one's mindset, behavioural orientation, neurobiological capacity, lifestyle choices and certain physiological indicators in a matter of ten days would have seemed fantastical and virtually impossible on many dimensions.

Someone looking at the facts of the case through a lens of typically experienced pace and nature of characterological improvements might safely dismiss the possibility of the extent of transformation that occurred in me as a case of imaginative exaggeration. I know I would have felt that same way in reality checking the story.

The beautiful thing is that it's not essential that you come to believe every aspect of this story because the most

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fundamental premise of learning *Vipassana* meditation is that our unconscious mind only believes as much as it experiences on its own body form to be true anyway. Everything else is understood by our conscious mind at a purely intellectual level and not internalised experientially.

As such, you should (as I would) only believe as much as you can actually experience first-hand, as that will be the only truth that matters for you. If my account has inspired you to learn more and directly experience the potential benefits, I would encourage you to try out *Vipassana* for yourself. The only way you can truly assess whether it might be of benefit to you is by experiencing it yourself directly.

I know I hadn't planned to write two books in 2011 and it all happened through the benefits I experienced from practicing *Vipassana*. I know I certainly hadn't expected to quit drinking or eating meat or all the various other lifestyle changes I have naturally made having tasted the nectar of *Dhamma* and rationally concluded that I was making choices that were taking me further away from being in a state of continuous equanimity.

I am not advocating the changes I have made in my life, simply mentioning them as examples of unprecedented personal change that would otherwise seem incredible. You could ask my drinking buddies (or my wife) what odds they would have given you before I went to the meditation camp for a bet that I would *ever* quit drinking alcohol, leave alone this early in my life. I state this not as a dictum I recommend others follow, but more as an illustration of the nature and extent of improbable and positive change.

Since returning from the camp, I have apologised to

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over a dozen people because I understood at a fundamental level that I would continue to remain anxious deep inside until I had made amends for my unbecoming words and actions in the past. These were people on the *apologies list* that I had put together during the camp. I knew deep down that I had hurt them in small or big ways but never truly felt the need to apologise to them because I had justified my behaviour with the reasoning that something they had said or done had led to my reaction.

When I made my apology to them, it seemed that while some of these people had truly moved on from the relevant unpleasant episodes in the past, there were others who had been waiting inordinately for an apology to heal their wounds and bring necessary closure to these unforgettable circumstances and incidents.

The comfort with which I have bared my soul and shared some deeply personal details and intrinsic personality traits stems from the clarity I have acquired that what matters most now that I have realised the positive benefits of *Vipassana*, is that I build awareness of its liberating power with everyone in this world.

Any amount of effort I might make to share my story and convey the message about the holistic healing value of *Vipassana* wouldn't come close to repaying the debt of gratitude I feel for the learning and benefit I have received. As such, I feel no hesitation in sharing important and private facets of my personality (before and after *Vipassana*) if that helps bring to life the beneficial capacity of the technique through practical and relatable examples.

It's been over four months since I returned from the

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camp as I write the concluding piece in this chronicle. While the effects of the technique were more pronounced the day I left the camp, I still feel more than 80% of the benefits if I measure based on the ultimate yardstick of maintaining equanimity in stressful situations. And I know this is only because I continue to meditate at least an hour every day in the morning and for half an hour in the evenings before sleeping.

One of the things that I appreciate about *Vipassana* is that there are no gimmicks involved in its use. There is no such thing as a free lunch in the world of *Dhamma*. You maintain the continuity in your meditation practice and you draw benefit from it. If you allow your efforts to dwindle, so does the beneficial value. Priding myself on being ‘a what you see is what you get’ kind of person, I value a technique that places emphasis on our own sincere effort to draw proportional benefits instead of boasting about effort-free instantaneous miracles.

I have managed to fit meditation into my already packed schedule with relative ease as I am continuing to sleep a lot less than I used to before starting *Vipassana*. My current schedule is included as an appendix in the back of the book. After a few weeks of oscillating between four and six hours, my body has settled on exactly five hours of regular sleep, which typically translates into going to bed around 11 pm and waking up automatically five hours later at 4 am.

My routine is similar on weekends and I no longer need long afternoon naps on Saturdays to recover from the intense week. Sometimes on the weekends, if I have a late night at a party, the schedule adjusts slightly for a day and returns back to normal fairly quickly. All this might seem like



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a fairly regimented lifestyle but it actually has the opposite impact.

I feel like I now have time for everything I want to do and much more, because I now have more waking hours in the day. Add on top of that the productivity increase I am seeing at work and a greater sense of general energy levels, I feel as if I have 28 hours in every day! So even if two of the extra hours go in meditating, I still have two additional hours to do everything else.

The around-the-clock schedule at the camp has further instilled in me the sense that every waking (and now also the semi-conscious sleeping!) minute is precious, so much so that I find myself planning work for intervals of time as short as three to five minutes! The focused attention on the task at hand together with a mind that is free of almost all background noise drives lightning speed of thought and accurate analysis of information. The egoless assessment of situations allows for quick and fair decision-making in complex situations.

I try to focus every minute of my day on purposeful activities without inducing any stress from the seemingly hyper-activated approach to managing my time. This is allowing me to get more done in the same amount of time than I would have ever imagined. In the first two months since the camp, I completed the first edition content of both the internal book I am writing for my company and this *Vipassana* introductory course journal for external publication while managing an office of nearly 200 colleagues, developing and serving my clients, continuing a sporting interest in squash through a club league, and maintaining a fairly active

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social calendar.

Not only have I experienced an up-tick in my productivity, I can feel that my relationships with people have seen an improvement – both with my family and at work. I feel compassion when I observe the same people doing things that would have irritated me in the past. I find myself naturally spending more time with my junior colleagues and peers, discussing their lives and how I can be of help to them in their careers and their overall wellbeing.

I don't feel rushed when having such conversations as I would have before, given the pressure of work that goes unattended while I spend time talking about 'softer' issues. I know that not only do I genuinely care more about people than I ever did in the past, I am also comfortable with the thought that my work will get done satisfactorily, if not better than ever before, because of the increased speed and problem-solving creativity that is enabling me to come up with better solutions faster.

While the only true yardstick of my progress is the personal 'equanimity index' that I can self-monitor day to day, those that know me well (friends, colleagues, family) have shared that they have seen distinct changes in my mode of operation and behaviour. My wife can verify that I get upset a lot less often, if at all, at any major or minor setback. I feel a lot less strongly about big and small life choices which would otherwise either consume me or compel me to dictate the outcome that I desired. My life goals that were focused largely on self-advancement have shifted towards purposeful endeavours that also improve the wellbeing of others.

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I could go on interminably about the countless benefits that I am experiencing day by day, hour by hour, and minute by minute that continually remind me of the beneficial qualities of the liberating technique I've had the good fortune of coming upon and learning recently.

Every instance that I would have experienced a certain way in the past brings forward a surprising revelation when I operate differently in the same situation now. Each day is filled with positive intrigue as I realise these changes and experience them becoming a part of my new life. The story didn't end with the ten days at the *Vipassana* camp. It continues on, and gets better and better.

So with all these benefits accruing in my life and filled with the energy and motivation to help others realise the value of *Vipassana*, I don't need to push myself out of bed at 4 am every morning (or ever need to set an alarm as I know my mind can wake me!) and sit down for my pre-dawn *adhitthana* every day.

Meditation to me is now no different than bathing, or eating or exercising. Much in the same way that we don't willingly skip meals or feel clean without a morning shower or work out the body without physical activity, I meditate every day to cleanse my mind, nourish and recharge it.

It would be a fair question to ask why after 35 years of living life without it do I suddenly feel that meditation must be an integral part of my life? The simple and truthful answer is that I didn't know that such a powerfully liberating technique existed that could simultaneously unlock all the mysteries and struggles in my life. And now that I have experienced its benefits first hand, how could I logically go back to my

## THE EQUANIMOUS MIND

older life pattern which was clearly sub-optimal?

Some of my friends and acquaintances who know about my new interest in *Vipassana* have been forwarding me news and information about medical research on the neurobiologically proven benefits of meditation. I am deeply grateful and encouraged to hear about such findings, but don't feel the need to read proof of the technique in a journal article or other clinical literature, having experienced the benefits on every square nanometer of my mind and body.

I am appreciative that such research or personal accounts of realising change might motivate those who do not yet have awareness about the technique. I was fortunate to have stumbled upon it because my wife who kept nudging me closer and closer over a period of nearly five years to attend my first ten-day course.

While I am quite pleased with all the changes I have experienced thus far, I am also keenly aware that there is no magic bullet for sustaining the benefits. The simple answer is that there is no substitute for working diligently (as *Guruji* would say) to continue the practice of *Vipassana* day in and day out. I don't profess to be able to predict the future (or spend any time agonising over it any longer) so can't say for certain how things will exactly turn out in the future.

I do know that what I have chronicled in this book is a true and accurate account of what I experienced in the ten days of the introductory *Vipassana* course. I treat the rest of my life now as a live experiment, where I keep recording observations as new stimuli and data come into contact with the new 'operating system'. I plan to continue reporting the changes I experience through a

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website ([www.equanimousmind.com](http://www.equanimousmind.com)), a blog ([equanimousmind.wordpress.com](http://equanimousmind.wordpress.com)), and a page on facebook ([www.facebook.com/EquanimousMind](http://www.facebook.com/EquanimousMind)).

*Vipassana* has the capacity to transform the human mind and character. The opportunity is awaiting all those who wish to make the effort. I sincerely hope everyone gets the same opportunity that I had to arrive at the door step of *Dhamma*.

Through selfless contributions toward lodging provisions and their time, previous generations of students ensure that people don't have to undergo any cost or inconvenience to attend *Vipassana* courses.

The biggest hurdle I had faced was to find the time and courage to spend ten days away from my non-stop life. Ten days now seem like a very small price for the lifelong benefit that learning the technique can bring.

If the thoughts and ideas in this book appealed to you, I would be grateful if you pass it on to someone who you think might also draw inspiration from reading it.



# Appendices

**Fitting *Vipassana* into  
Work and Personal Life**

<b>My Current Daily Schedule</b>		
<b>Time</b>	<b>Weekdays</b>	<b>Weekends</b>
0400	Wake up and shower	Wake up and shower
0430		
0500	<i>Vipassana</i>	<i>Vipassana</i>
0530		
0600		
0630	Write or work	Write
0700		
0730	Breakfast	Breakfast
0800		
0830		
0900		
0930		Free time
1000	Work	Mandarin lessons (Sat) /
1030		Free-time (Sun)
1100		
1130		
1200		
1230	Lunch	Lunch
1300		
1330		
1400	Work	Rest, read, write and recreation
1430		



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Time	Weekdays	Weekends
1500	Work	Rest, read, write and recreation
1530		
1600		
1630		
1700	Snack (typically fruits)	Snack (typically fruits)
1730		
1800	Exercise or work	Free time
1830		
1900	Dinner	Dinner
1930		
2000	Rest, write or work	Recreation
2030		
2100		
2130		
2200		
2230	<i>Vipassana</i>	<i>Vipassana</i>
2300	Sleep	Sleep
2330		
0000		
0030		
0100		
0130		
0200		
0230		
0300		
0330		
0400		



## **Personal Transformations Experienced through *Vipassana***

In my line of work I am often advising CEOs and other senior executives on business situations that predicate an imperative for a complete turnaround or overhaul. In order to paint a compelling picture of the magnitude and nature of the change (required), we often use a ‘from’ (before) ‘to’ (after) framing. I share a running list of some of the transformative changes I have experienced since I have started practicing *Vipassana*. These represent both personal and work life situations.

For ease of reference, I have categorised these along three dimensions – interpersonal dynamics, neurobiological activities, and lifestyle.

I elaborate on some of the mindset shifts and revelations that drove these changes in *Appendix C*.

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<b>INTERPERSONAL DYNAMICS</b>		
<b>Area or theme</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
	<b>(Baseline pre Vipassana)</b>	<b>(Post Vipassana)</b>
Work and social relationships orientation	Kinship with like minded people; slight aversion towards and avoidance from those with divergent styles and interests	Favourable disposition towards all living beings and genuine concern for their wellbeing and happiness
	Evaluating people's merit on life achievements and educational qualifications	All humans are equal beings and are intrinsically good
Conflict resolution mindset and disposition	Caught up in convincing others about sanctity of my views and approach	More discerning of situations where my viewpoint is critically important to outcome versus not
	Visibly upset or unhappy when my ideas get overruled	Genuinely sanguine when my ideas are not the winning ones
Perspective on situations	Often negative choice of expression to describe and address difficult situations	Increasingly positive framing of situations despite them being undesirable
Language	Frequent use of swear words in stressful situations	Finding it hard to form a swear word even in my thoughts let alone verbalise it

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<b>INTERPERSONAL DYNAMICS</b>		
<b>Area or theme</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
	<b>(Baseline pre <i>Vipassana</i>)</b>	<b>(Post <i>Vipassana</i>)</b>
Interactions	Often haphazard when priorities compete for time and mindshare	Focused genuine interest in others' wellbeing and giving them undivided attention
Management style and mindset	Delegation of process responsibility. Handson management of important details	Empower others to lead, get out of the way, and only manage results and milestones
<b>NEUROBIOLOGICAL ACTIVITIES</b>		
Attention span	Very easily distracted and prone to multi (often triple) tasking	Complete focus of attention on one task at a time. Exploded multitasking myth.
Mind-body coordination and mental faculties	Reasonably good (likely above average)	Significant acceleration in reading comprehension, writing speed, analytical judgment, creative and lateral problem solving
		Improved sporting abilities (squash)

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<b>NEUROBIOLOGICAL ACTIVITIES</b>		
<b>Area or theme</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
	<b>(Baseline pre <i>Vipassana</i>)</b>	<b>(Post <i>Vipassana</i>)</b>
Stress level and anxiety	Easily perturbed with unpleasant external stimuli	Intrinsically relaxed and improving day by day
	Hassled when certain situations or outcomes are not playing out favourably	Increasingly equanimous about outcomes regardless of their favourable or unfavourable value
Time management	Always feel there aren't enough hours and minutes in the day to get things done, yet often experiencing frequent downtime (travel delays, waiting for meetings) that drive productivity loss	Focused attention and more active mind makes for faster dispatch of thoughts and action  Every minute counts and is valuable. Can make use of every waking (and sometimes even sleeping) moment to get things done
Awareness and wellbeing	Diffuse awareness of physical surroundings, people, conversations and self	Hyper vigilant (in a good way) about surroundings – physical, emotional, clearer and simpler sense of self

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<b>NEUROBIOLOGICAL ACTIVITIES</b>		
<b>Area or theme</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
	<b>(Baseline pre <i>Vipassana</i>)</b>	<b>(Post <i>Vipassana</i>)</b>
Awareness and well being	Ongoing mind chatter – cycling from one thing to another, past to future, positive to negative	More than 80% of mindshare focused on the present in a neutrally oriented manner; mind chatter (noise signals) have disappeared almost completely
Orientation of consciousness	Self-driven orientation	Purpose-driven orientation
	Placing significant emphasis on attribution of contributions in work and personal life	Agnostic to recognition of source of input
Physiological response towards external stimuli	Hypersensitivity towards light and unpleasant or discordant sounds, insects and animals	Gradual but very perceptible improvement in sleeping with night-lamp on, TV in the background, traffic sounds, or music playing Empathy towards insects and animals

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<b>LIFESTYLE</b>		
<b>Area or theme</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
	<b>(Baseline pre <i>Vipassana</i>)</b>	<b>(Post <i>Vipassana</i>)</b>
Overall lifestyle	Manageable (full schedule) but increasingly unsustainable	Easily manageable even with 2 hours of meditation added per day
Alcohol consumption	2-4 (or more drinks), 4-6 times a week (technically within clinically approved limit of 14 drinks per week for adult males)	Can never willingly drink alcohol again having experienced how it impacts mindfulness
Caffine intake	4-6 cups of tea or coffee a day	One cup of tea with breakfast
Food consumption	‘Live to eat’ mindset	Mindset increasingly ‘eat to live’
	Frequent intake of meat items (in one or more meals every day)	Completely vegetarian intake. Can no longer be responsible for harm to a living being
Health	83 kg	79 kg and dropped waist size by 2 notches Sustained weight loss
	Borderline total cholesterol and liver function	All vital indicators in healthy range



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<b>LIFESTYLE</b>		
<b>Area or theme</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
	<b>(Baseline pre <i>Vipassana</i>)</b>	<b>(Post <i>Vipassana</i>)</b>
Health	Chronic back pain needing weekly chiropractor treatment or musculoskeletal massage for pain management	Near abolition of chronic pain, now episodic and manageable through meditation
Sleep	6 to 7 hours during weekdays 7 to 8 hours on weekends 1 to 2 hour naps on weekends to catch-up Some difficulty falling (or staying) asleep and feeling fully rested	5 hours feel more than what I need every day Continuously feel well-rested and alert
Exercise	30-60 mins of cardiovascular exercise (running or squash) 2-3 times a week	Same as before but feeling more focused during physical activity and less exhausted by it
Orientation towards money and wealth	Monetary earnings are an indicator of competence and recognition of performance What I earn is largely for the welfare of myself and direct family	Wellbeing in life has little to do with earning capacity. Earnings should come from purposeful pursuits A meaningful portion of my earnings should contribute towards greater good



## **Lifestyle and Mindset Changes**

Throughout the story and in the personal transformations section (*Appendix B*), I have referenced certain lifestyle changes that have naturally come about as a result of practicing *Vipassana*. My mindset about some other aspects of my life has also altered considerably. In addition, certain mysteries have revealed their secrets through objective and egoless observation of these paradoxes. I share a few examples in this section.

## *THE EQUANIMOUS MIND*

### **Drinking**

Interestingly, I somehow managed to get through college without getting acquainted with any form of alcohol. Even my first year of graduate school was a relatively dry introduction to a few samples of vodka with orange juice. It wasn't until I turned 22 in my second year at the University of Michigan that I developed real appreciation for literally every variety of alcohol known to man. The appreciation soon became a hobby and a habit by the time I started working at 25.

I was by no means a drunk, but really enjoyed my drink with a nice meal, in social gatherings and at sporting events. Six months in Italy in my second year in consulting led to a deeper taste and interest in wines. A higher paycheck year on year increased my ability and willingness to indulge in rare and exquisite single malts. Three olive dry Belvedere or Grey Goose martinis started any nice meal with colleagues or clients when I was on the road, to be followed by wine with the main entrée, and often a port or liqueur after dinner to accompany a round of cheese, fruit or dessert.

Frequent work travel also meant easy access to alcohol in flights where it's hard to even keep count of how many drinks are consumed with a single meal, as the attendants continue topping-up glasses of wine. While my overall intake was probably just within the limit set by the medical community of 14 drinks a week for male adults, I would say that drinking was more than an integral part of my social life. I enjoyed alcohol for its quality of relaxing the mind, as a social lubricant, and also because I enjoyed appreciating

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the subtleties of its various forms and tastes.

I was certainly an enabler when it came to drinking and would play the clichéd role of the party host or social event organiser who would ensure everyone always had enough to drink and was having a great time. I also didn't spare the occasional teetotaler in my circle of acquaintances and colleagues without badgering them about being a light-weight for not drinking. Everyone who knew me well, associated me with my fondness for the substance. I share this contextually to emphasise how intertwined my life had become with drinking.

As chronicled in the day to day account of my time at the *Vipassana* camp, it slowly became a certainty that I would never willingly drink alcohol again. Initially, I was working through the hardship of potentially being outcast by friends who associated with me as drinking buddies, or clients and colleagues who had experienced me as a wine and scotch aficionado, and might find it strange to relate to me abstaining from drinking. Slowly, I found answers to all these minor puzzles and returned to day-to-day life confident about my resolve to not drink again.

Giving up alcohol was completely unplanned and unexpected. My father-in-law was accurate in estimating that I would likely be longing to have a stiff drink after ten long and dry days at the meditation camp. I hadn't even been disciplined enough to follow the guidance from the course registrar to moderate or abstain from intoxicants two weeks prior to the camp and had enjoyed my fair share of scotch on the rocks at an extensive Indian wedding even the night before the camp had started!

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Notwithstanding my lasting and steady interest in drinking for over 12 years since college, I simply cannot go back to it now because the basic premise that led me to try and appreciate alcohol came crashing down when I learned to meditate. I had been drinking to relax my mind, in thinking that relaxation would lead to de-stressing and to a state of bliss and temporary happiness. Having experienced a technique, which clearly demonstrated to me through my own experience with it that I need to have a hyper-aware mind in order to be truly happy from the inside, how could I now willingly consume a substance that helps to numb the mind and senses?

Clearly, alcohol doesn't have any nutritional value, so there's no rationale to ingest it for the sake of a healthier body. And if the effect it had on my state of mind is exactly the opposite of what I now know I need to remain equanimous, it can't possibly be a good idea to consume it.

I considered whether I liked it for its taste and recalled that alcohol was very much an acquired taste when I first started drinking it. I remember that I could only develop a taste for vodka initially by drowning it in orange juice. Slowly I moved to red wines, then beer and then scotch, always gradually adapting my palate to accept the taste of the various forms. I had *learned* to like the taste of alcohol for the value I thought it created, which was to relax my mind.

A simple calculation revealed to me how much I drank in a typical year. One medium sized hard drink is 50 ml at approximately 40% alcohol content by volume, or 20 ml of pure 100% alcohol. Similarly, a reasonably sized glass

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of wine is 150 ml (if you pour five glasses from a 750 ml bottle), which at approximately 14% alcohol content, works out to 21 ml of absolute alcohol. A typical bottle (or can) of beer is 330 ml with roughly 6% alcohol potency, equating to 19.8 ml of pure alcohol.

Regardless of the type of drink or its source (grapes, barley, hops), an average drink is nearly 20 ml of 100% ethanol –  $C_2H_5OH$ . Rounding up to approximately 15 drinks a week, which was safely what I was consuming at the rate of two to four drinks a night four to six times a week, that works out to 300 ml of absolute alcohol a week. Scaling that up to an annual number, that's a whopping 15 litres of 100% ethanol!

So every year, I was washing my body with a quantity of an intoxicating chemical that represented two to three times the total amount of blood in my system. And this is a fairly conservative estimate in my view, knowing the number of Patiala pegs (or double drinks) I liked to pour or the half litres of beer I would wash down over long brunches. And I was doing all this to help facilitate my mental faculties to enable a perceived sense of relaxation?

What had become self evident through days of learning meditation was that those short cycles of numbing the mind to relax the senses and feel de-stressed eventually led to a state of mind that was less aware and, therefore, less able to stay centred and focused on the present moment in an equanimous way. The reason I won't willingly consume alcohol now is because I have exploded the myth that it helped me relax, and there is no reason to do something that does exactly the opposite of what is expected of it.

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### Eating

While there has been a clear shift in my mindset towards eating, I wish I could say that it's been as strong as with drinking. My approach now is clearly more 'eat to live' from a distinct 'live to eat' one before *Vipassana*. In the past, I used to truly indulge myself when consuming food. While it was not to the extent of complete gluttony or binge eating, it was certainly beyond what was necessary to provide essential body fuel. I would eat some form of meat every day and could never have enough of favourite delights like tandoori chicken or lamb chops.

Through *Vipassana*, I have discovered a few things that have led to some changes. At the most fundamental level, I have realised that everything I consume has an impact on my body in the form of a sensation. Spicy food leads to feeling warm, fried food to feeling heavy, drinking water drives the feeling of hydration, and so on.

Following the same logic, the idea of consuming something that was the flesh of another live being no longer appeals to me. I am not able to clearly characterise the exact impact meat has in terms of a sensation but believe it would be proportionate to its origins, much like it is for other dietary items cited above.

Another aspect of the *Vipassana* learning has led me away from eating meat. I have experienced that every action I take is driven by an emotion from within. I also know that if I allow a negative emotion inside, it leads to the generation of anxiety. Even squashing a fly makes me feel at least a little upset about the insect, which in turn makes me



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slightly anxious, whether I have the awareness to realise it in the moment or not.

It thus computes that the concept of being responsible (even indirectly) for a being losing its life in order to be served as my meal would also impact my state of equanimity. At a fundamental level, I can no longer consume meat because my mind would have to accept the responsibility (and its anxiety-inducing consequences) for taking a life.

My choice to stop consuming meat is not driven by a religious belief. Prior to *Vipassana*, I had consumed meat almost my entire life, and my religious beliefs haven't changed since practicing meditation.

But I continue to struggle with the quantity of food I consume (some old habits die hard!). I at least have a much greater awareness now about a few things:

1. When I am truly hungry versus simply craving some food item out of the desire for a sensory experience.
2. When I am well-fed and can stop eating but choose to go on to fulfill food cravings.
3. How much food I need to eat during a given meal based on (and proportional to) my level of physical activity, before or after the meal.

More than half the time (and increasingly so), I am now able to check myself from either succumbing to food cravings or simply overeating. What's different about the times when I can versus the times when I cannot?

I stop when I am able to remind myself that even the sensory experience of taste (which is what I crave) is also impermanent. In other words, I keep eating to sustain (or

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bring back) a certain taste into my mouth. Ironically, I have realised that the minute the food moves down the throat, I can no longer taste it – so I keep having more of it to make the flavour linger on in my mouth. I am referring to situations when the nourishment part of eating is done and I am eating purely for taste.

When I realise that the sense of taste of a certain food item is going to disappear from my palate eventually, I am able to stop as soon as I have had enough food to serve as body fuel. I have found that my conscious mind is able to guide me when this point has arrived. It's when I am under slight stress or when my unconscious mind is untamed that I ignore these inner signals and overeat. The same is true for eating when not hungry, but eating just to fulfill some craving.

Some other dietary habits have changed naturally. My intake of caffeine is now almost negligible. I simply don't feel the need or the urge as I am enjoying high energy levels throughout the day. I now find myself snacking mostly on fruits and drinking a lot of water. My simple explanation for these changes is that a controlled mind has the ability to make healthier lifestyle choices.

Finally, I have noticed that my meditation practice is better when I moderate quantities during meals. My lay explanation is that the unconscious mind is too busy digesting food to focus on meditating when I am overfed!

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### Sports

I have clearly seen a positive impact on my sports abilities, particularly in my game of squash, as a result of practicing meditation. The improved mind-body coordination enables more agility and presence on the court. I find myself anticipating the opponent's shot better and moving more swiftly across the court to return the ball.

Another thing that has clearly changed is that I find myself choosing to hit different shots than I would have in the past. Previously, my choice would often be influenced by my mind selecting the shot I felt like hitting, versus the shot it knew from experiential memory would have the highest likelihood of unsettling the opponent. Now, my unconscious mind has a reduced sense of ego and directs my conscious mind to choose shots more objectively rather than be affected by my subjective (and often emotional) response.

The weight loss I have experienced through *Vipassana* is helping me be more nimble on the squash court but the real benefit I have drawn is from the mind being more aware, alert, and equanimous. I can remember that in the past there would be plenty of background processes going on in my mind when I was playing – thoughts about work, brooding over some nasty email received during the day, worrying about client situations, planning weekend activities, etc. Naturally, these extraneous thoughts cluttered the mind and kept it from focusing its entire capacity on the game.

I have often seen players say to themselves, “Focus!” or “Concentrate!” during the game when they play a lousy shot. It's like asking a computer to run a complex database

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query when the available cache or processor speed has been diminished by various other programs. Clearly, we realise that focused concentration of the mind enables enhanced performance during an activity, including sports. It feels great to have learned a technique that naturally, inherently, and spontaneously makes the mind focus intensely on the current activity so that the conscious mind doesn't have to force it to de-clutter.

Another thing I have noticed in my game is that I used to be quite upset with myself when I hit a bad or losing shot. Now, because of the mind's retraining that all things are impermanent (including victory or loss and even the feeling of being upset with myself because of the poor timing or execution of the shot), I coolly move to the next point in the match. Having also learned that negative thoughts lead to anxiety and anxiety has a way of multiplying itself exponentially, I try to steer clear of thoughts that drive anxiety while playing.

I can relate back to countless situations when because I got hassled during the game at a certain juncture over a certain upset, the rest of the match grew progressively worse. This is something we all consciously know but have a hard time internalising and implementing when in the heat of the game. *Vipassana* slowly resets the mind to detach itself from outcomes and enables equanimity through such small upsets.

Aside from squash, I frequently run and swim. Both these activities have also seen an improvement. When running on a treadmill, I have noticed that my steps are much more coordinated, my hand movements tight and

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rhythmic and my back straight. I also no longer feel bored and am choosing not to turn on the TV or use headphones and listen to music when running on the treadmill.

My mind is happy and satisfied to be completely focused on running and paying attention to every aspect of the physical activity that it is directing. I also feel much less exhausted (even though well-exercised) after running as I did in the same period as in the past. Previously, my feet would sometimes not land perfectly symmetrically and my arms flail a bit and I would find myself leaning forward awkwardly as the body became tired during exercise.

My swimming action is more streamlined now. My body pierces the water with a bit more deliberation and accuracy. Given that I am not a seasoned swimmer, a fear of deep water has persisted over the years. For the first time, I feel little or no fear when in the deep end. I also feel a lot more comfortable trying new strokes (e.g., backstroke) that I previously considered too hard to experiment with because of losing balance swimming backwards. I am now making steady progress.

Reflecting on my observations of improved sporting ability, I remembered reading somewhere a long time ago that various serious athletes and other sports professionals meditate to improve their concentration, especially before a major tournament or performance. In addition to the intense physical training, strict diet and disciplined lifestyle, there is a role for fine-tuning the mind to enable optimum performance.

It is the mind's ability to focus and channel the entire body's energy and movements into perfection that

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lead to spectacular performances, which appear humanly impossible. The term 'playing unconscious' has a much greater meaning for me now, having seen the power of a well-trained unconscious mind.

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### Language

I have noticed a distinct and natural change in my choice of words since learning and practicing *Vipassana* in two major ways:

1. I naturally avoid using a negative framing now, even when describing difficult situations.
2. I rarely (if at all) use swear words now, which were as frequent as punctuation marks in the past when I expressed myself when under stress.

I believe there are specific reasons for these unconscious changes. First, it seems as if my mind no longer judges 'favourable' versus 'unfavourable' situations very differently. As such, the framing of difficult situations is neutral or slightly positive. The second one seems to be driven from the basic principle of anxiety-inducing behaviour. Having experienced first hand that the minute my mind entertains a negative thought or emotion, the resultant impact is first and foremost a dose of anxiety to itself, the mind naturally steers clear of language that is offensive.

While for some (including myself in the past), using swear words is 'no big deal' or 'just a form of expression' or 'a way of finding a release', I have realised that no matter how conditioned we might become to using foul language, the minute we engender a thought to use an expletive, something inside of us becomes agitated and the balance of the mind shifts ever so slightly.

The reason we use negative language is because we are upset in the present moment or concerned about something playing out unfavourably in the future. Either way it is an

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act of expressing unpleasantness and is in itself a form of unpleasantness. Either way, it leads to further generation and multiplication of anxiety in oneself, whether we realise it or not. A mind that is reconditioned to maintain its equanimity will find it hard (and somewhat illogical) to voluntarily take actions that induce anxiety upon itself.

I never understood before why some wise people would always stress that the language we use is important, as I simply thought of words as emotionless building blocks of communication. I now realise that not only does the choice of words convey the state of mind of the person expressing them but also the compound effect they subsequently have on the same individual and those around him, and find myself naturally paying more attention to my language.



## APPENDIX C

### **Insecurities**

As the understanding of the law of impermanence took deeper root in my mind, the concern around life's typical insecurities started diminishing rapidly. At some stage or another, frequently or infrequently, I had found myself struggling with age old issues.

- Do I provide my loved ones with all of life's comforts? Will I always be able to do so in the future? Save enough for children's education, weddings, medical emergencies?
- Will I manage to save enough funds to retire comfortably? Will I be able to retire at a time that I am ready to step away professional work life?
- How (and sometimes why!) is it that this friend or that colleague has a better house or car?
- Do people at work (especially my superiors) like me? If not, why not? What can I do about it?
- Will I be evaluated fairly and adequately in my annual performance appraisals? Is my career progressing well and in the right direction? What if I lose my job suddenly?
- Why are other colleagues being promoted (clearly undeservingly) faster than me?
- What if I suffer an illness than might threaten my life?
- Does my wife still love me deeply? Might she leave me for some reason or another and I will feel completely abandoned?
- What if my parents need me to care for them and

## THE EQUANIMOUS MIND

my life situation doesn't easily allow me to do so?

As I reflected on these and other such concerns that I would worry about from time to time, I realised that thinking about them led to anxiety and stress only because I *chose* to experience these issues in a certain way. While it's helpful to plan ahead, worrying about events in the future (and especially doing so with a negative framing), leads to nothing but self-induced pressure and a feeling of helplessness.

Consider the example of job security and career progression. If instead of focusing 100% of my mindshare and energy 100% of the time on doing the best job I can to serve my clients and company, I start thinking about how my career might not be going well or I might be at the risk of losing my job, some of my actions at work might unconsciously focus on unproductive activities.

I would probably think more about what others think about my performance or I might perhaps say some things that implied or revealed my inherent insecurity about my career. This could likely trigger a small or big downward spiral. First of all, less than 100% of my available productive capacity would focus on doing good work, which is likely the only relevant determinant of my career progressing well aside from my intrinsic skills and abilities.

Secondly, my expressions of anxiety about my prospects would likely convey that impression to others, and they might genuinely doubt my performance despite the actual results. The more I perceived that others around me doubt my performance, the greater would become my anxiety to demonstrate otherwise. Such attempts were likely to come from a place of insecurity and could most often have the

## *APPENDIX C*

opposite effect, leading me into the downward spiral.

Finally, at a higher level, even if there were non-linear aspects in being evaluated (e.g., corporate politics, which would make the case for some self-promoting activities versus focusing solely on doing good work), so what if wasn't evaluated fairly or most favourably? The feeling of being upset over not getting the desired appraisal is also impermanent. As such, that itself will go away sooner or later so why worry about it?

One by one, as I have examined each of my insecure framings of various life issues, I have discovered that it was my thinking that led to feeling anxious about them and not the external circumstances. The external environment and events will be what they will be, it's how I choose to relate with them or process them that determines whether I remain equanimous.

At the most basic levels the mind feels helpless when we force it to dwell upon subjects and situations in a time frame (e.g., the future in the case of insecurities) where it cannot take any action. It must feel agitated and incapable when we ask it to apply itself to changing outcomes in the future. The best thing we can do to improve our future is to take positive actions in the present.

An equanimous mind, that is the master of the present moment, is one that is likely to act in ways that will naturally enable a better future. It will also have the wisdom to remain unperturbed if its expected outcomes are not achieved because it understands and embodies the law of impermanence at a fundamental level.

## Money

My orientation towards money is one of the many things that I feel has fundamentally changed as a result of undergoing the learning of *Vipassana*. I grew up in an upper-middle income family in India and both my parents had to work hard to make a living and provide well for the family. Thus, the value of hard-earned income has been deeply ingrained.

I went to a private school well beyond my family's means because my parents wanted to place their children a notch above our socioeconomic status. By giving us the opportunity to draw upon the best possible education, they hoped to enable us to achieve greater success in life. They made conscious trade-offs to prioritise our education over other life pursuits and interests.

Clearly, such an upbringing coupled with being in school where the other kids came from wealthier families, led to a mindset that wealth equated to societal value. Surprisingly, despite this hardwiring, my initial life plan was to become a professor after my doctoral work, which was unlikely to be a very lucrative career choice.

Life had something else in store and I wound up in the world of management consulting and the mindset that associates monetary value with recognition took deeper and firmer roots. Over the ten years in the business world, I came to believe that one of the primary ways a corporate executive or professional's value is measured by one common and measurable yardstick – compensation.

Year after year, the first thing I would do after returning

## APPENDIX C

from the Christmas holidays was to check how much bonus I had received for the previous year. The bonus became a way of feeling appreciated by the company where I worked and total compensation became something that provided a guide for how much value was placed on my skills as a business professional.

Media helps fuel such thinking by constantly announcing pay packages of senior executives as part of normal business journalism. So I knew something was different when I came back from *Vipassana* and noticed that it was nearly the end of January and I hadn't checked my bonus statement from last year. I finally looked into it as I had to hand all my compensation information to my tax preparer.

I think of money now as another asset that I can purposefully put to use towards the greater good of mankind after ensuring that my family's essential needs are well met. Money is something I earn from society, so society at large should have a stake in benefitting from it as well. I no longer feel the importance of having a certain amount of money set aside in order to feel secure about the future needs of my family.

I understand at a fundamental level that like everything else, money is also impermanent, and therefore not something worth feeling attached to. Attachment to money and other assets is probably the easiest recipe for stress and anxiety. Regardless of how much (or how little) you have of it, you tend to worry about either having more or hanging on firmly to what you have.

This isn't to underplay the value of earning a good living or providing for material needs in modern day living. On

## *THE EQUANIMOUS MIND*

the contrary, I feel equally (if not more) energised by the prospect of being a productive contributor to society through my professional skills and equally passionate about utilising my intellectual and financial assets to benefit society.

I feel a lot less attachment to money as an asset that belongs to me or something that should largely be apportioned towards uses that involve my direct family. I certainly no longer feel that the money I earn is what equates to or acknowledges my value as an individual or a professional in the world, and believe in spending money to enable achievement of important purposes and not on pure self-gratification.

## **Mind Matters**



### **Conscious and Unconscious Mind**

Throughout this book, I have made references to the *conscious* and *unconscious* mind. In my view, the mind remains an object or phenomenon that is hard to grasp and define. However, we all understand the meaning implied when we refer to it. There are books written on the distinction between our conscious, subconscious and unconscious minds. As such, I won't attempt to offer clinical or psychological definitions here, but proffer my simple understanding in lay terminology.

I think of the conscious mind as the mental faculty that enables us to take actions when we deliberately choose to do so in order to achieve a certain purpose, however big or small. As an example, the conscious mind directs us to pick up a food item and consume it in order to fulfill the goal of nourishing our body or the need to offset hunger.

Analysing information (e.g., reviewing a map to determine point to point directions) or formulating a point of view (e.g., household budgeting to assess financial wellbeing) are all activities largely in the domain of the conscious mind.

## THE EQUANIMOUS MIND

Participating in sports is mostly driven by the conscious mind though we often refer to athletes or sports people ‘playing unconscious’ when it appears that their actions are beyond the conscious domain. My overall view on the conscious mind is that it represents *voluntary* neurobiological activity.

My take on the unconscious mind, sometimes also referred to as our subconscious or the inner mind, is that it represents and dictates the intrinsic tendencies that drive our thought processes, emotions, and underlying beliefs. The unconscious mind is what drives us from the inside, often without our conscious knowledge or choice.

Continuous activities such as breathing, digestion, heartbeat and other internal organ functions are governed by the unconscious mind. This mind can never truly ‘go to sleep’ as that would have fatal consequences. It is also the unconscious mind that determines our initial and spontaneous response to external stimuli, both physical and emotional.

The unconscious mind then influences the conscious mind to take the appropriate actions to express the desired response. As an example, if someone insults us and hurls expletives in our direction, the unconscious mind will likely trigger an injury response. This in turn will translate into the conscious mind either fighting back with the proportionate anger, which might manifest as a nasty retort or disgruntled surrender, if the aggressor is someone we cannot afford to displease.

There is some interplay with the conscious mind trying to modulate the unconscious mind’s knee-jerk response, but is unable to fully contain the underlying emotion even if the external action is somewhat muted. My overall view on the



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unconscious mind is that it represents *involuntary* neurological and emotional activity.

Both the conscious mind and the unconscious mind learn through conditioning. The conscious mind learns what it does through seeing, listening, reading, role modelling after others, relating to past experiences in order to formulate its knowledge bank of life situations and the appropriate actions to be taken under certain circumstances.

The unconscious mind, on the other hand, is a less easily influenced entity. It only believes, and gets conditioned through, as much as it actually experiences first hand on the physical form with which it associates itself, i.e., our body. Everything else is to it in the domain of theoretical knowledge and not something that necessarily holds in practice.

Our own responses to our bodily cravings and aversions feed and update its knowledge bank of life situations and associated typical responses. If we continue to satisfy these cravings and aversions with a symptomatic relief response, the unconscious mind is trained to believe that fulfilling its body's temptations is part and parcel of life and existence. When such needs and desires go unfulfilled, it responds in ways (sometimes immoral or vicious) to ensure it continues to remain satisfied.

In the battle between the unconscious (experiential) and the conscious (intellectual) minds, the unconscious usually wins and can sometimes lead to harmful and unintended consequences. The conscious mind can only do so much to subdue the unconscious mind by relating to extrinsic knowledge (or conforming to societal norms) but the unconscious is overpowering in situations that involve

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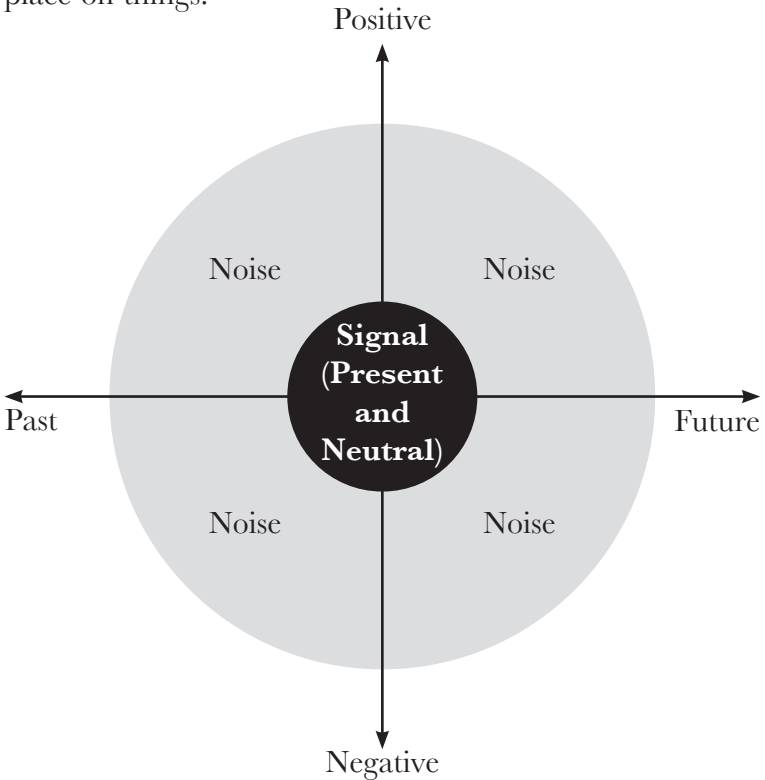
either deep rooted cravings, aversions or when its sense of ego is involved.

The only systematic way for the unconscious mind to purify is for it to observe and experience the universal laws of life and existence – impermanence, the sources and the cycle of misery, ingredients essential to equanimity – on its own physical body form. Only through such practical experiments and self-observations can the unconscious mind be reconditioned to become and remain equanimous.

## Signal and Noise

The functioning of our mind seems akin to radio frequency transmission. The ‘signal’ is the energy with which we are trying to focus our mind’s full attention consciously towards an activity. The ‘noise’ is all the corresponding unconscious, unwanted and uninvited (yet ongoing) background processes in the mind.

This noise is two dimensional in nature, one dimension being time and the other one being the value judgment we place on things.



## THE EQUANIMOUS MIND

In the time dimension of noise, our thoughts cycle back and forth between past and future events. The other dimension is the positive (favourable) and negative (unfavourable) judgments we make as we evaluate these past and future situations.

These ‘noise’ waves partly diffuse the mind’s ‘signal’ strength from focusing undividedly on the task in the present moment. It’s the ratio of signal to noise that determines our mental productivity, attentiveness, and ability to remain equanimous. When we are under stress of any kind, this ability to channel the mind’s energy further diminishes and we find ourselves gripped with anxiety.

*Vipassana* meditation focuses the mind’s energy like a sharp laser beam laser on the present and orients it to view everything in the world with a neutral framing, thereby cancelling out the two-dimensional noise and making the inaccessible portion of our brain available for productive and purposeful pursuits.

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### Equanimity Index

One thing I have found useful in gauging how effectively I am practicing my meditation is the development of my very own measurement of my state of mind is in the form of personal ‘equanimity index’. Naturally, this is a relative scale, as I have yet to discover or experience what a state of perfect equanimity would feel like. At the moment, I have pegged mine to a 100% for how I felt when I left the camp. The components of such an index will vary from person to person. Mine is along the following lines.

<b>Symptom / Component</b>	<b>Equanimity correlation</b>	<b>Relative weighting</b>
Irritability and restlessness	Inverse	High
Neutrality towards outcomes	Direct	Medium
Patience in unexpected situations (e.g., delays)	Direct	High
Mental lethargy	Inverse	Medium
Criticism of others	Inverse	Low
Selfless drive to help others	Direct	High
Moderation in food intake	Direct	Medium
Insecure behaviour and language	Inverse	Medium
Money mindedness	Inverse	Low
Focused attention (avoid multi-tasking)	Direct	High
Sensitivity to light and sounds	Inverse	Medium



## ***Vipassana* and Religion**

I must emphasise strongly that *Vipassana* is a completely secular technique and not grounded in any organised religious sect or practice. Contrary to some misinformed belief (including mine before attending my first ten-day camp), *Vipassana* is not a Buddhist practice. True, *Vipassana* was rediscovered by Siddhartha Gautama, who later came to be known as The Buddha. The word *buddha* simply means the enlightened one and can refer to any individual who has achieved such a state of being. Even Gautama emphasised that several others before and after his time achieved enlightenment, and thus were *buddhas*.

Buddha did teach *Vipassana* to his followers, several of whom later formed the organised religion called Buddhism. However, this doesn't imply that *Vipassana* is a religious technique or something that is the exclusive knowledge of Buddhist monks. *Vipassana* is no more Buddhist than eating with chopsticks is Chinese.

Just as a Westerner using chop-sticks to eat doesn't become Chinese in the process, practicing *Vipassana* doesn't amount to becoming Buddhist. It was practiced initially by the followers of Buddha, who rediscovered the ancient meditation technique, but is now something that people from all walks of life and religious (or non-religious) beliefs can draw benefit from.

In the camp that I attended, we had a mixture of the

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various religions represented in India as well as several Western ones. Coming at it logically, the practice of *Vipassana* is such a basic mind-body technique that it is hard to associate any religious underpinning to it. We are not chanting the name of any superbeing to liberate us from the world of miseries, we are simply observing the pleasant and unpleasant sensations on our body and choosing to remain equanimous.

Before I went to my first *Vipassana* camp, I had doubts about any religious intrusion or discourse during the program. With each passing day, all such concerns were allayed and I realised how misinformed I had been. I was fortunate that I didn't refuse to attend the camp because I thought that it would be associated with or have a foundation in organised religion.

Learning *Vipassana* meditation hasn't impacted my religious affiliation not altered my belief in God. What has changed is that I no longer expect religious or astrological miracles to help me resolve problems I might face in life as I have experienced first hand that the fundamental source of happiness and misery lies inside me.

I would encourage people from various religious backgrounds and different faiths to try *Vipassana* and not pre-judge that it will have an impact on their beliefs.



## **Meditation – Essential to Life?**

I now view meditation as something that is essential to my life. I have come to this conclusion at many levels of my mental existence. It is easy to notice that we do a lot of things for the physical body. For instance, we shower every morning to clean ourselves of dirt and other impurities. Some find that a shower in the morning serves to refresh them and gives them a necessary kick-start to the day. Others bathe at night to soothe themselves and prepare for a restful night. Regardless of the time of day or purpose, cleansing our physical body is a routine we all practice.

Secondly, we eat at least two, and more likely three, meals a day to provide our body with adequate nourishment to sustain itself and conduct day-to-day activities. Most of us also find time to workout at least two or three times a week to provide the body an opportunity to exercise its muscles so they continue to function well and not atrophy from disuse. This includes cardiovascular activity to indirectly exercise the heart, the proper functioning of which is vital to life.

As I continue to make meditation part of my day-to-day activities, I have wondered why, despite the obvious importance of our mental wellbeing, I hadn't considered basic activities that care for the mind as essential as those that maintain a healthy body. We do so much for our physical form because we can see it, touch it, and it draws attention to itself (e.g., hunger pangs) when it needs something but

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do very little for our mind, which is the control tower that directs our every action!

Just as I would feel bodily unclean if I went without a refreshing shower every day, I feel mentally cluttered when I haven't meditated for at least an hour within a 24 hour interval. I find my 'equanimity index' dipping and unwelcome feelings like irritability entering my mind frame, so I quickly get back into the rhythm of meditation. Having realised how meditation cleanses, nourishes, and energises my mind, it is natural to make it an essential part of my life.

Naturally, the question arises – how come something that I have recently discovered and clearly lived without for decades now seems as essential to life as electricity, telephone, automobile or the internet? As a human race, we learn, discover or invent lots of new things that become integral parts of our lives. I can only guess how the cavemen might have felt when they first discovered taking a bath, something that must have been a novelty in prehistoric times.

## **Guidelines and Expectations**

As I have mentioned in the opening, it was fortuitous that I didn't quite know everything that the meditation camp entailed or I might not have braved it, thinking that I knew the limits of my ability to endure bodily discomfort. Having attended the camp, I have a greater appreciation of the teaching methods and have developed a perspective on the sort of mindset and preparation required to draw the most benefit from a first *Vipassana* camp. I write these not so much as dos and don'ts, but more like helpful hints for those who might be considering registering for the ten-day course.

1. Carefully review the essentials of *Vipassana* meditation on the course registration website ([www.dhamma.org](http://www.dhamma.org)) and clearly understand the rules and regulations. Unless you like rolling with surprises as I did, make sure you are comfortable in following each and every requirement before you sign up. I say this not to discourage, but to ensure you go in with eyes wide open.

Learning to meditate is hard work in my opinion and I don't want to convey a false impression about the effort and endurance required. That said, as I discovered, the ability to persevere through the course as the challenges get progressively tougher continues to self-develop and increase as you start responding to the technique. I

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hope this gives some confidence and encouragement to the more cautious and risk-averse readers.

2. For those who might not be familiar with sitting in a cross-legged posture or similar positions, I recommend learning to sit comfortably on the ground in some posture that allows your back to remain straight for at least ten minutes at a time. In my opinion, sitting upright without back support is the best way to come into *samadhi* position to learn meditation.

Don't despair if you have a musculoskeletal condition that inhibits you from doing so. The various centres provide appropriate chairs and other specially designed sitting furniture to make sure you are comfortable. We had people with disabilities attend the camp and draw benefit from the technique.

3. Resist the temptation (at all costs) to leave the camp part-way through the course. I can't emphasise this point enough. There will be times when quitting seems like the only logical option because you are either not experiencing clear benefit initially or are having a difficult time following the instructions and it is too discomforting to continue.

Whatever the reason, stay the course. The introductory course is designed to be ten days long because through experimentation with different durations, the *Vipassana* institute has discovered that it takes a minimum of that much time to 'reboot the system'. Leaving early will impede the process from having its full impact.

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If you have made the effort to come to the camp in the first instance expecting to stay the full ten days, then do so and don't give yourself the option of leaving early. Only if you attend the full ten days can you appreciate and conclude whether the technique can be of potential benefit to you.

4. Work sincerely and diligently to grasp the technique while at the camp. As with anything in life, the benefit you will draw from learning *Vipassana* is directly proportional to the effort you put into following the curriculum and the recommended practice at the camp. Make a wholehearted attempt to follow all the instructions meticulously and incorporate them into your practice. No matter how hard a new exercise might seem at the outset, give it a proper shot and do it as best as you can, but don't give up altogether.
5. Trust the learning process. I am not recommending blind followership or faith here. I was myself quite skeptical of the prospect of benefitting from the course when I arrived at the camp. That said, it's important to give the technique a real chance to take root in you so you can draw benefit from it. While it's good to have an inquisitive mind, don't dismiss something simply because you don't understand it yet.  
The camp is only ten days long relative to a much longer lifespan. Try to suspend making a final judgment until after the camp is over to decide whether the technique worked on you or not. As some wise person once said,

## THE EQUANIMOUS MIND

“You can do very little with trust alone but absolutely nothing without it!”

6. Every person’s experience with *Vipassana* is unique so try to avoid comparisons with others, whether within your sub-group as you are called up to meet the conducting teacher together or with those whose experiences you have heard or read about. One of the foundational aspects of *Vipassana* is that you believe only as much as you experience yourself.

As such, by definition, every person’s experience will be different. Comparing yourself with others will only discourage you, if you feel that someone else is responding more or faster to the technique.

7. Related to the point above, don’t come in at the outset with a certain set outcome you expect to achieve from the course. Attend the course hopeful and inspired that you will draw some benefit from *Vipassana* but don’t try to put in hard and fast terms and conditions that will make you anxious if your progress isn’t tracking to your ingoing expectations.

On the other hand, have an open mind as you start out at the camp and you will be surprised by the sort of beneficial changes you may experience as you journey through the learning process. Come in full of hope but free of expectation and you will undoubtedly draw benefit from *Vipassana*.

## **Locations offering *Vipassana* courses**

*Vipassana* courses are conducted in the following places around the world in meditation centres and specially organised camps. New centres and locations are being added continuously. The latest information is available on the *Vipassana* website [www.dhamma.org](http://www.dhamma.org)

*Dhamma Pattana*, the location where I attended my first ten day course is one of the principal meditation centres in India, and is co-located with the *Global Pagoda* site in Gorai, Mumbai. This centre offers the executive course for business executives but is open to participants from all walks of life. More details about this location (including photos of the facility) are available on [www.pattana.dhamma.org](http://www.pattana.dhamma.org)

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**ASIA PACIFIC**

**Australia**

Canberra\*  
New South Wales  
(Blackheath, Northern  
Rivers)  
Northern Territory (Alice  
Springs\*, Darwin\*)  
Queensland (Pomona)  
South Australia (Adelaide)  
Tasmania (Hobart)  
Victoria (Woori Yallock)  
Western Australia  
(Brookton)

**Cambodia**

Battambang

**Fiji\***

**French Polynesia\***

**Hong Kong\***

**India** (*listed separately*)

**Indonesia**

Bali\*  
Bogor (Cisarua)

**Japan**

Kyoto  
Tokyo

**Malaysia**

Pahang

**Mongolia**

Ulaanbaatar

**Myanmar**

Bago  
*Mandalay*  
*Mogok*  
Yangon  
Yechan OO

**Nepal**

Biratnagar  
Birganj  
Chitwan  
Kathmandu  
Kirtipur  
Lumbini  
Pokhara

**Philippines\***

**Singapore\***

**South Korea\***

Chungcheongbuk

**Sri Lanka**

Anuradhapura  
Kandy  
Kosgama

**Taiwan**

Lyu-Guei  
Taichung

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*Cities in italics have multiple course locations*

\* Non-centre course location



APPENDIX H

**ASIA PACIFIC**

**Thailand**

Bangkok  
Chiengmai\*  
Kanchanaburi  
Khon Kaen  
Lampoon  
Phitsanulok  
Prachinburi

**New Zealand**

Auckland  
New Caledonia\*

**INDIA**

**Andhra Pradesh**

Hyderabad  
Medak  
Nagarjun Sagar  
Nizamabad  
*West Godavari* (Bhimavaram,  
Vijayarayai)

**Bihar**

Bodh Gaya  
Muzaffarpur

**Chattisgarh**

Bilaspur\*  
Durg  
Narayanpur\*

**Gujarat**

Ahmedabad  
Dharmaj\*  
Kutch  
Mehsana  
Rajkot  
Vadodara

**Haryana**

Karnal  
Sohna  
Sonapat

**Himachal Pradesh**

Dharamsala

**Jammu & Kashmir**

Ladakh

**Karnataka**

Bangalore  
Gulbarga\*  
Shimoga\*

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*Cities in italics have multiple course locations*

\* Non-centre course location

# THE EQUANIMOUS MIND

## INDIA

### **Kerala**

Chengannur

### **Madhya Pradesh**

Balaghat

Bhopal

Indore

Jabalpur

Ratlam

### **Maharashtra**

Ajaypur

Akola

Aurangabad

Dhule

Hivra

*Igatpuri*

Kalyan

Kohlar\* (Ahmednagar)

Kolhapur

Khadavali

*Mumbai*

Nagpur

Nashik

*Pune*

Shegaon\*

Sugata Nagar

### **Mizoram**

Kamalanagar

### **New Delhi**

### **Orissa**

Jatni\*

### **Punjab**

Hoshiarpur

### **Rajasthan**

Ajmer

Churu

Jaipur

Jodhpur

Mount Abu\*

Pushkar

### **Sikkim**

### **Tamil Nadu**

Chennai

Coimbatore\*

### **Tripura**

Machmara

### **Uttar Pradesh**

Lucknow

Sarnath

Sravasti

### **Uttarakhand**

Dehradun

### **West Bengal**

Kolkata

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*Cities in italics have multiple course locations*

\* Non-centre course location

APPENDIX H

**NORTH AMERICA**

**Canada**

Alberta\*  
British Columbia (Lake  
Cowichan, Merritt)  
Manitoba\* (Winnipeg)  
Ontario (Egbert, Ottawa\*)  
Quebec (Montebello)

**United States**

California (Kelseyville,  
Joshua Tree, North Fork)  
Colorado\* (Boulder),  
Georgia (Jesup)  
Hawaii\* (Honokaa)  
Idaho\* (Ketchum)  
Illinois (Pecatonica)  
Massachusetts (Shelburne)  
Michigan\*  
Mid-Atlantic\*  
Minnesota\* (St. Paul)  
Montana\* (Missoula)  
Oregon\* (Sisters)  
Texas (Kaufman)  
Washington (Onalaska)

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*Cities in italics have multiple course locations*

\* Non-centre course location

THE EQUANIMOUS MIND

**EUROPE**

**Austria\***

**Belgium**

Dilsen-Stokkem

**Bulgaria\***

**Croatia\***

Zagreb

**Czech Republic\***

Prague

**Denmark\***

**Finland\***

Helsinki

**France**

Brittany\*

Champignelles

Saints\*

Southern France\*

**Germany**

Triebel

Northwest Germany\*

Southeast Germany\*

**Greece\***

**Hungary\***

**Ireland\***

**Italy**

**Kyrgyzstan\***

**Latvia\***

**Lithuania\***

**Macedonia\***

**Netherlands\***

**Norway\***

**Poland\***

**Portugal\***

**Romania\***

**Russia\***

**Serbia\***

Belgrade

**Spain**

Barcelona

Baleares\*

Canarias\*

Galicia\*

Levante\*

Zona Centro\*

**Sweden**

Ödeshög

**Switzerland**

St-Imier (Mont-Soleil)

Ticino\*

**Turkey\***

**Ukraine\***

Kiev

**United Kingdom**

*Hereford*

East Anglia\*

Northern England\*

Sussex\*

**Uzbekistan\***

*Cities in italics have multiple course locations*

\* Non-centre course location

**LATIN AMERICA**

**Argentina**

Buenos Aires\*

Cordoba\*

Mendoza\*

**Bolivia\***

**Brazil**

Miguel Pereira, RJ

Nordeste\*

Paraná\*

Planalto Central\*

Sao Paulo\*

**Chile\***

**Colombia**

Bogota\*

Medellin\*

**Costa Rica\***

San Jose

**Cuba\***

Havana

**Dominican Republic\***

Santo Domingo

**Ecuador**

Cuenca\*

Quito\*

**El Salvador\***

Santa Tecla

**Guatemala\***

**Mexico**

Valle de Bravo

Morelos\*

Monterrey\*

Veracruz\*

**Nicaragua\***

**Panama\***

**Paraguay**

Asuncion\*

**Peru**

Cusco\*

Lima\*

**Puerto Rico\***

**Uruguay\***

**Venezuela**

Estado Aragua

Merida/Lara/Tachira\*

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*Cities in italics have multiple course locations*

\* Non-centre course location

*THE EQUANIMOUS MIND*

**MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA**

**Middle East**

**Bahrain\***

**Egypt\***

**Iran**

Tehran\*

**Israel\***

**Lebanon\***

**Sultanate of Oman\***

**United Arab Emirates**

Dubai\*

**Africa**

**Angola\***

**Ethiopia\***

**Ghana**

Volta Region\*

**Kenya\***

**Morocco**

La Palmeraie\*

**Nigeria\***

**South Africa**

Worcester

**Swaziland\***

**Tanzania\***

**Uganda\***

**Zimbabwe\***

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*Cities in italics have multiple course locations*

\* Non-centre course location

## **Glossary of Foreign Language References**



### **Hindi and Sanskrit**

<i>Aasakti</i>	Attachment
<i>Abhyaas</i>	Practice
<i>Acharya</i>	Teacher
<i>Anitya</i>	Impermanent
<i>Anubhuti</i>	Experience
<i>Arya</i>	Pure, noble
<i>Ashubh</i>	Bad or wrong
<i>Ashudh</i>	Impure
<i>Avidya</i>	Ignorance, lack of knowledge
<i>Bhang</i>	Complete dissolution
<i>Bhavana</i>	Feeling
<i>Bhikshu</i>	Ascetic
<i>Bhikshumi</i>	Female ascetic
<i>Brahma Mahurat</i>	Auspicious pre-dawn hour
<i>Chila</i>	Plain lentil crepe, like <i>dosa</i>
<i>Chiweda</i>	Salted snacks made of chips and wafers
<i>Daana</i>	Charitable donation
<i>Dakshina</i>	Payment to teacher for knowledge acquired
<i>Dharah Pravah</i>	Free flow

## THE EQUANIMOUS MIND

<i>Dharma</i>	Original meaning is principles of absolute truth, now used to refer to organised religion
<i>Dhokla</i>	Rice and lentil cake
<i>Dosa</i>	South Indian style lentil crepe
<i>Dweshha</i>	Aversion
<i>Ghanti</i>	Small tinkling bell
<i>Gulab jamun</i>	Condensed milk based sweet Indian dessert
<i>Guru</i>	Trusted teacher
<i>Halwa</i>	Sweet semolina pudding
<i>Hatna</i>	Move (back or sideways)
<i>Idli</i>	South Indian style rice cake
<i>Kali</i>	Famous Indian goddess (wife of <i>Shiva</i> ), also known as <i>Durga</i> and <i>Tara</i>
<i>Kriya</i>	Action
<i>Maitri</i>	Friendship
<i>Mudna</i>	Turn or return
<i>Mudra</i>	Posture
<i>Maun</i>	Silence
<i>Mukti</i>	Complete liberation
<i>Na</i>	No or don't
<i>Namaste</i>	Indian greeting style with hands folded near chest
<i>Nirvana</i>	Self-actualisation
<i>Poha</i>	Snack from Western India made with rice wafers
<i>Peeche</i>	Back
<i>Poocho</i>	Ask
<i>Pujya</i>	Revered
<i>Raaga</i>	Craving
<i>Paratha</i>	Stuffed Indian bread



## APPENDIX I

<i>Poornima</i>	Full moon
<i>Pragya</i>	Experiential knowledge
<i>Pranayama</i>	Yogic deep breathing exercise
<i>Pratikriya</i>	Reaction
<i>Punya</i>	Good deed
<i>Raita</i>	Salted spice flavoured yoghurt
<i>Sabudana khichdi</i>	Tapioca pudding
<i>Sambar</i>	South Indian style lentil curry
<i>Sadhak</i>	One who does <i>sadhna</i> , refers to student meditator
<i>Sadhna</i>	Practice (of meditation)
<i>Sahayak</i>	Assistant, used in reference to conducting teachers
<i>Samadhi</i>	Meditative (sitting) posture; higher level of concentrated meditation
<i>Samata</i>	Equanimity
<i>(Sam)vedna</i>	Sensation
<i>Sangya</i>	Knowledge or intellect
<i>Sanskar</i>	Character trait, inner feelings
<i>Seva</i>	Service, often voluntary
<i>Sevak / Sevika</i>	Server, one who does voluntary service (male / female)
<i>Sheel</i>	Leading a life of purity and virtue
<i>Shlokas</i>	Hymns
<i>Shubh</i>	Good or Right
<i>Shudh</i>	Pure
<i>Shunyagar</i>	Solitary meditation cell
<i>Tapo bhumi</i>	Meditation land (camp)
<i>Ujjai</i>	Yogic form of deep and long breathing
<i>Upma</i>	Savoury semolina snack

## THE EQUANIMOUS MIND

<i>Vapis</i>	Return
<i>Vichaar</i>	Belief
<i>Vigyan</i>	Consciousness experienced through the five sources and the mind
<i>Vikaar</i>	Negative emotion or impure action
<i>Vitarna</i>	Distribute

### **Pali**

<i>Aana Pana</i>	Observation of ingoing and outgoing breath
<i>Adhitthana</i>	Strong determination
<i>Anicca</i>	Impermanent
<i>Dhamma</i>	Principles of absolute truth
<i>Dukha</i>	Misery, unhappiness
<i>Buddha</i>	One who has attained enlightenment
<i>Gacchami</i>	Follow or go towards
<i>Metta</i>	Friendship, compassionate love
<i>Sankara</i>	Negative emotion
<i>Sangha</i>	Noble community of the Enlightened One's disciples
<i>Saranam</i>	Refuge
<i>Vipassana</i>	Observing things as they really are



